

# The LAPSE of ENOCH WENTWORTH

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## SYNOPSIS.

Enoch Wentworth, newspaper man, and Andrew Merry, actor, after the guests at a poker party depart, play a last hand, the stakes to be absolute control of the future of the loser. Wentworth wins and they decide to keep the matter secret. Dorcas, Enoch's sister, becomes interested in Merry. Knowing of his shortcomings from her brother she tries to arouse the actor's ambition. He outlines the plot of a play he has had in mind and the girl urges him to go to work on it. When he completes the play and reads it as the forfeit of the bond won in the poker game.

## CHAPTER V—Continued.

Enoch wrenched his arm free and rose awkwardly to his feet. The comedian drew back with a startled expression, as if he had struggled with bewilderment.

"You see," Enoch's lips were perfectly colorless, "your mental ability is pledged to me."

Merry stared at him, curious and perplexed.

"It is your mental ability which I claim now," Enoch said deliberately. Andrew spoke in a coarse whisper. "I don't understand."

"I demand your play!"

"You demand my play? To sell?"

"No; of course not," Wentworth jerked out the words abruptly. "Why should I want to sell? I want to produce it—as mine, as one—I have written."

Merry moved toward him with an agony of terror in his eyes. "You want to take from me my one complete effort, my one ambition, my everything—the work which is making a man of me, on which I have toiled steadily for weeks? You would do that? Do you understand—while I wrote I scarcely stopped to eat or sleep? When I did sleep I dreamed of it and—"

He stopped, too much affected to trust his voice. He laid one hand over the other as if to still himself, for he was trembling.

Wentworth stood looking at the younger man. Something cold and relentless crept into his eyes. He laid his hand on Merry's arm.

"Let me talk to you, Andrew."

"Talk! Talk! You damned thief!"

He pushed Enoch aside with quick repulsion. His face was blazing with



"You Demand My Play? To Sell?"

wrath. He went tramping about the room in a vague, heedless, half-blinded fashion. A thought seemed to strike him abruptly. He wheeled around suddenly and faced the man beside him.

"Why in the devil's name, Enoch, should you do this? Have I ever done you one cruel, disloyal act in all my life?"

Wentworth did not answer. He returned the terror in Merry's eyes with a cool, stubborn glance.

"Did you have this hellish plunder scheme in mind when you drew up that bond?" he asked unsteadily. "What did you have in mind when you made me your slave?"

"I don't know—exactly," Wentworth turned such a straightforward gaze upon Merry that he realized the man was speaking the truth. "As I told you that night, and I am telling the truth, it was nothing but a fancy of mine. When you came to me with this," Enoch's hand dropped on the manuscript which lay upon the table, "you came with a great temptation; it was too much for me."

"Evidently," cried Merry. His tone was withering in its scorn. He seated himself and his eyes turned fiercely upon Wentworth. The muscles of his cheek twitched as regularly as a pulse.

"The play is mine," Enoch seemed to have grown strangely cool and impervious to contempt or anger. "The play is mine," he repeated; "it is the due and forfeit of my bond."

The eyes of the actor narrowed and he laughed savagely.

"Take your pound of flesh," he cried. "What will you do with it?"

a suit case. For a minute Wentworth forgot the visitor in his inner room.

"Bless my heart, I'm glad to have you back," he cried. "Never in all my life have I seen you look so well."

She held him at arm's length and gazed at him critically. "I wish I could say as much for you, Enoch. You look decidedly seedy. I've got to stay right here. I'm the only one who can manage you."

"I beg your pardon, Dorcas, I've a guest here." Her brother led her to the inner room and introduced his caller to her.

"Mr. Oswald and I were having a business talk, Dorry—not exactly business either. You may stay if you wish and hear a play. I was just going to read to him. If he likes it he will star Andrew Merry in it."

"Oh!" A glow of anticipation shone in the girl's eyes. She laid her coat and hat on the window seat and dropped into a low chair beside her brother. Once or twice she patted him affectionately on the shoulder.

The Englishman watched her. There was vivid admiration in his eyes, but Dorcas did not see it. Her only thought was of the happiness in store for Merry.

Wentworth laid the pages of manuscript on the table and cleared his throat. Oswald sat ready to bestow a business-like attention upon the reading. When Enoch lifted the first page his visitor asked: "May I know who wrote the play?"

"I did," answered Wentworth quietly. "Ah!" said the Englishman. He noticed the startled look on Dorcas' face. It escaped her brother, who sat turned half way from her.

Wentworth began to read. He was an excellent reader; his enunciation was slow and distinct. The story quickly unfolded itself in strong, vivid language. Grant Oswald, who was an ardent student of dramatic literature, fell immediately under its spell and listened with intent quiet.

The minds of both men were so vitally concentrated upon the drama that they were scarcely conscious of a movement when Dorcas crept from her low chair to the window seat. She lay back against a pillow, gathered the folds of a silky portiere around her, and stared down at the square. She heard her brother's voice in fragments. Those fragments were always the words of the girl, Cordelia, or of the father fallen to pitiful estate. She clasped her hands together with such a grip that it numbed her fingers. A strange pain and a horrible suspicion were seeping through her body and burning in her veins. Outwardly she was inert.

Suddenly she was awake again, wide awake, tingling with life and emotion, listening to her brother's vibrant voice. The day of release had come for John Esterbrook. He stood with halting, trembling steps, fearful at the sight of the world he had left twenty years before, hiding his eyes from its tumult. Then Cordelia ran to meet him—young, hopeful, loving and eager.

Dorcas forgot the horror and doubt which had swept her down for a moment, she was thinking of nothing but the play. It was greater, more human, than she had dreamed of that day when Andrew and she walked home over the beach at Juniper Point. Her eyes grew wet with pity, then she smiled happily as life ceased to be a problem for Cordelia. Love had come, and the father turned to work out what was left him of a future.

Enoch laid the manuscript aside. The Englishman, hearty in his congratulations and enthusiastic, was urging the earliest possible production. He offered unlimited money and insisted that the best company New York could produce should be engaged. The spell of the story was still upon Dorcas. She passed out, shaking hands hastily with Oswald.

"Dorry," cried her brother. She did not answer.

"The play stirred her intensely," said Oswald. He had noticed a trace of tears on her cheeks. "Was this the first time she heard it read?"

"Yes, I had never even told her of it. She has been away while it was written."

"Is your sister an actress?"

"No—she wants to go upon the stage."

"Let her have her way," advised the Englishman. "Her every action shows that she possesses dramatic talent."

"It isn't my idea of her future."

"Stage life is exactly what one chooses to make of it. Curiously enough, I have a conviction she could play Cordelia."

Wentworth brushed his hand across his forehead and stared at the scattered sheets of manuscript on the table.

"Get Merry here as soon as possible. I want a consultation with both of you," suggested Oswald while he drew on his gloves. "It is now only a matter of time and a theater. If I may advise now, don't choose anyone on this side for Mrs. Esterbrook. I know a woman who can play that part to perfection. Again let me congratulate you. It's a great play, one of the greatest I've heard in years. It's bound to succeed."

Wentworth bowed, but a sudden flush blazed into his face. He was not hardened enough yet to accept congratulations for the brain product of another man.

"Good-by," said the Englishman, holding out his hand cordially.

"Good-by," murmured Wentworth. He moved to the window. A carriage stood waiting in front of the house. He watched Oswald step into it and drive away.

Suddenly he recollected that Dorcas had not spoken a single word of praise or congratulation on the play. She was always enthusiastic and happy over every triumph that came to him. She must have thought well of the

play. She had a full appreciation of Merry's talents and she had seemed to like him while they were together during the summer. He paused to pull himself together mentally, then he called her. She came slowly into the room, which had grown dark.

"Dorry," said Wentworth slowly, "do you know you have not said yet that you like—my play?"

"Your play?"

"Why, Dorry?"

The girl spoke in an unsteady voice. "I don't believe, Enoch, that Andrew Merry told you of a long talk we had at Juniper Point. You remember you left me alone with him when you were called to Boston. We sat on the rocks one afternoon and he told me his plot for this play—he had been thinking it out for years and years. Why," the girl shook her head impatiently, "why, Enoch, he had labored on it so long that some of the speeches were written in his mind. Sometimes he put the story into the very words you read!"

During a few minutes Enoch Wentworth fought the battle of his life. It was the struggle between good and evil, which every human being harbors to a greater or lesser degree, in one soul, in one body. Wentworth sighed. The battle had passed and evil had won. It was prepared to carry him through the most dangerous

moment. With it came fresh valor, and not only the power to sin further, but a mysterious weakening of the moral tissues which made it possible for him to sin coolly and remorselessly. He turned on the light and with cool composure faced his sister.

He met her gray eyes without a quiver. They asked a question which could not be evaded.

"I hate to tell you, Dorcas," there was a tone of reluctance in Wentworth's voice, "but Merry is down again, down in the gutter."

The girl jumped to her feet. "I don't believe it!" she cried. "Besides, if he were, what has that to do with his play?"

Enoch did not answer. Instead he asked a question. "Dorcas, do you care for—do you love—Andrew Merry?"

A flush blazed into the girl's face. In spite of the telltale color her brother believed her.

"Yes, I care for Andrew Merry—very much. I do not love him."

Enoch gazed at her wistfully. He knew, as she did not, how easy it is to cross the bridge from mere friendship to love.

"Why did you ask me that?"

"I wanted to find out how much it would hurt if I told you the truth. Merry is not worth your love, he is not even worth your friendship."

"It is not true!" There was indignant protest in the woman's voice. "I know better, so do you. Only this does not explain about his play, for it is his play."

"You remember he left Juniper Point suddenly?"

"Yes," she raised her head with an eager gesture. "He went away to write this play." She pointed to the manuscript which lay on the table.

"Yes," said Enoch slowly. "He began bravely enough. Then—he went under, as he had done so many times in his life."

"What was it?" cried the girl. "Drink or gambling?"

Enoch lay back in his chair. He began to marvel at how easily he could lie, because a lie had never come readily to him before.

"Drink and gambling—and everything." Her brother shrugged his shoulders as if in disgust. "Of course he stopped writing. A man could not write in his condition. He sent for me. I stayed by him night and day and—wrote. You see—I wrote it."

He lifted a written sheet from the loose pile of manuscript.

"Perhaps—but it is not your play," Dorcas shook her head with obstinate incredulity.

"I told him so. I suggested we make it a collaborated play."

"It is not even a collaborated play, Enoch. Why, every situation, the plot, even the very words, are his."

"He wants me to father it."

"He must have changed since he said good-by to me. He was on fire then with hope and ambition."

"He has changed," conceded Enoch gravely. It was a relief to make one truthful statement.

"Is he to play 'John Esterbrook when it is produced?"

"No other actor can. Merry has the entire conception of it now."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"I thought you promised Mr. Oswald to have him here and get things started for an early production?"

"I did. I am hoping to find Merry at one of his haunts. He must be found and put on his feet. There's a tremendous lot at stake. Dorry," he turned to her appealingly, "won't you help me?"

"I'll help you," Dorcas spoke slowly. "If you can assure me of one thing."

"What?"

"That there is no wrong to be done. There is no wrong to be done. Merry will have the opportunity of his life, if he can only be made to see it that way."

"And there is no wrong to be righted?"

"There is no wrong to be righted." Then he must be found. When he is found," the girl spoke decisively, "he must appear before the world as the author of his play."

"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 man—his 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 virtile play, then to stage it with practical skill and artistic feeling and originality. A remarkably strong company was engaged. Oswald insisted on fitting even the smallest parts with people far above the level of subordinate actors. The salary list grew to stupendous figures. One morning Wentworth reconstituted 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 mere 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."

### (TO BE CONTINUED.)

### Firemen's Water-Jackets.

In Berlin the firemen wear water jackets with a double skin, which they are able to fill with water from the hose. If the space between the layers becomes overfilled the water escapes through a valve at the top of the helmet and flows down over the fireman like a cascade, protecting him doubly.

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### Mum's Word.

Hicks—You never can tell about a woman.

Wicks—You shouldn't, anyhow.

### Once for All.

"Now, Freddie, once for all, will you wash your face and hands?"

"Sure thing, if it's once for all."—Judge.

### Lived by His Character.

"That man is absolutely devoid of character."

"What does he do?"

"Oh, he is a character sketch artist on the stage."

### Heard at a Reception.

"Alice is really the scrawniest gin among all our acquaintances."

"Oh, I don't know. It's really neck and neck between her and Maud Simmons, I guess."—Boston Evening Transcript.

### Environment.

The Mexican student was watching his first northern football game. It held his interest firmly. His face grew flushed, his arms were flung out, he shouted, hoarsely.

"Do you call this a game?" he asked of the man at his right.

"Sure," was the reply. "what would you call it?"

"In my country," said the stranger from across the border, "we would call it a seven-day pitched battle!"

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