



Watch your Skin!

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Young girls, old girls, plain girls, pretty girls—don't we all know those days before the mirror when, with a sigh, we turn away and say:

"Gosh—I do look plain!"

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The Countess of Landon.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"Bravo! Very well done, indeed. But you've forgotten your own father, my dear boy. You forgot your poor old father"—no word can describe the crowning mockery in the tone—"and poor's the word, too. I'm so poor that I shall have to go to the work-house, I'm afraid."

"You may go to the devil for what I care, you ruffian!" said Seymour, hoarsely.

"Thank you, my son," said Jake insolently. "But wait a bit. I'd go to the work-house, but they don't give pellets while you've got an able-bodied son who can support you, and that's what I've got. You can't have me for owning my belongings, my lord."

He chuckled. "You haven't got more brains than your father, anyhow," he continued. "But—and his tone altered—"there's no occasion to go to extremes. I'm a gentleman, like yourself, my boy, and when I'm heated like one I act on the square—my choice. Now, the ladies can settle which is the mother between them. I shan't interfere. I can hold my tongue till doomsday, but I want something for doing it. Now, look here—he came forward and seated himself on the morocco-tinted table close to Seymour, who, with a look of loathing and hatred, edged his chair away—"you make me an allowance—"

"Good ones, and the best of a father at the great table as you are, and a petty hundred or two wouldn't be any good to me. But give me, say, a thousand a year, and I'll keep my mouth as a cast-iron dog."

"You impudent scoundrel!" exclaimed Seymour. "I will not bribe you with a penny!" and he struck the table.

Jake bent down and looked straight into his eyes.

"That's not the way to talk to your father," he said. "What you'd strike me, would you?" He caught Seymour's raised arm, and with a deft movement stripped the shirt-sleeve upward. "Halloo!" he exclaimed. "Look at that!" and he pointed to a long cicatrice which shone on the lower part of the arm. "Don't struggle, my boy. I'm twice as strong as you, old as I am. See that! That was done when you were a kid. One

THAT INEFFABLE TOUCH



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night your mother and I were amusing ourselves by throwing the cutlery about. There's witnesses as saw it done. They said it would mark you for life, and—he swore—"so it has! Now, then, what will the jury say when they see you standing before them, looking the image of the old woman here, and the countess tells her story and I tell mine, with the scar to prove it? I can bring witnesses, if they can't. My boy, I'm sorry to say you've lost the day—sorry, because I bless your heart! don't want you to lose your lordship—not I! Where would be the good of that to me? Where would be my 'thou' a year? See? There!" He dropped Seymour's beumbed arm and laughed.

Seymour gazed up at him with amazed disgust and fear. Here was a cunning which more than equaled his own, and an audacity to which he could attain.

He looked from one to the other like a fox caught in a trap. His lips parted as if he still intended to speak words of defiance, when the door opened and Irene stood before them.

"Madame," she said, "what is the matter?"

Seymour sprung to his feet. "Nothing," he stammered with a forced smile that made his haggard face look old and pinched. "I—I am transacting a little business with these good people, my dear Irene. Then, as she drew back, he looked round. "Not a word to—her, or I will not make any terms with you! Leave the room, both of you." He sprang to take: "Come here to-night after dark and I will see you. I make no promise. I don't believe a word of what I have heard; but—but to prevent scandal—"

Jake grinned. "Of course you don't! That's the tone to take. Keep it up like that and I shall be proud of you. I'll look in to-night. You can let me in by the window here. Come away, old lady," and he nodded to Martha. She shrunk back as he approached, then opened the window, and flew out.

The countess rose and went into the hall. Irene had sent the servants away, and stood as if waiting for her.

The countess looked at her and sighed. "Where is the earl?" she said. "Bring him to me."

"The earl!" exclaimed Irene, going to her and taking her arm. "Why dear, you mean Seymour. You have just left him in the library; and her heart beat fearfully, for the expression of the countess's face filled her with alarm.

"No," said her lordship in a broken voice; "he is not the earl. My son Royce is the Earl of Landon. Bring him to me, please."

Irene supported her, for she shook visibly. "Oh, madame, what is it you are saying?" she murmured. "Royce—" "Royce, my son Royce is the earl," repeated the countess, as if she had nerved herself to a supreme effort. "There has been fraud. I have robbed him of his title and estates; I have tried to rob him of his happiness, but I will do so no longer, let the end be what it may. You will know the whole story of my wickedness presently, Irene—you will shrink from me then."

"Oh, so, dear, never!" murmured Irene, pale with fright; for every word the countess uttered went to strengthen the conviction that she had lost her senses.

"You think I am mad," said the countess, as they went up the stairs. "I could almost wish I was, or dead! I am speaking the truth. Royce is my son, my only son; he is the earl. Bring him to me, and the countess—" "The countess!"

"Yes, Madge!" said the elder woman. "I want to ask her forgiveness! For, have not I robbed her also?—I who, eaten up by my wicked pride, dared to look down on her with scorn and contempt. I know now that she is a better woman, a nobler woman, than I could ever hope to be! She—she a gyp—stepped in between me and that man last night! No one saw it, but I—but I saw it! She strove to save me—who had tortured her with my pride and insolence! I will go to her and pray for her forgiveness on my knees. And she will forgive me, for she is good—and brave. Take me to her, Irene, I will leave this place. I have not spent one happy, restful hour in it. She shall reign here."

There was a moment passed, then she turned her dry, aching eyes to Irene.

"And you, too—I have aimed against you through my greed of power. A week ago, and I should have stood silent and let him—him—she shuddered—"marry you! Oh, you think I am mad! But though I have been mad, I am sane now. Where is Madge?"

The tears were running down Irene's cheeks.

"Madge!" she said. "Madge is gone!"

"Gone!" echoed the countess. She sunk on to her bed in her room and gazed up at Irene. "Yes, I might have known it. And it is I who have driven her away—!"

She laughed, a bitter laugh of self-reproach and remorse.

"And Royce—my son—has he gone, too? Have I driven him away, too? Why do you not go? Don't come near me! I am not fit, you should touch me, a criminal—"

Then her arms dropped to her side and she fainted.

Meanwhile, Royce was riding furiously. The idea Irene had planted in his mind grew into a settled conviction. For whether should Madge die for refuge save to her own people? And that they were in the neighborhood, Jake's presence at the tower seemed to prove.

If he could only reach the camp before Madge had told her sad story, and take her away, all might yet be well. He could never go back to Monk Towers. They would leave England, and make a home somewhere beyond the seas.

Then he thought of Irene, and the pain at his heart increased and his face darkened. Would she be able to resist Seymour's cunning? Would she marry him? The mere idea of such a sacrifice made him shudder, and a groan broke from his lips.

Irene—the sweet lily-maid—Seymour's wife!

"Oh, God! hold and save her!" he murmured—"save her from that!"

He reached the town and pulled up the steaming horse at the inn. The landlord came out with obsequious haste. "Lawks save us, Master Royce! Is aught the matter?" he exclaimed. "Get down, sir, and let the hostler take the horse."

"No, no!" said Royce. "Are there any apples near here? Have you seen any caravans?"

The landlord stared at him. "Yes, plague take 'em!" he said. "They were in Melbury Wood all last week, and may be there now—"

(to be continued.)

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