

# The Gypsy's Sacrifice

OR  
A SECRET REVEALED

## CHAPTER XXXVI.

"Yes!" she panted, "you are my son—his!" and she looked at Jake with a shudder.

Seymour's face turned white, and his lips trembled; then he laughed. "Of all the grossly improbable lies that ever were uttered this is the worst!" he said. "I your son! I not the Earl of Landon!" He laughed. "It is the clumsiest lie that ever was concocted. And you sit there and listen to it!" He turned upon the countess savagely.

She raised her eyes to his; all the pride had left her face, left it looking like a stone mask.

"It is true," she said at last.

Seymour glared at her.

"You say that! You help this woman in her villainy! Do you know what you are saying, what you are admitting? I don't believe a word of it—no one would believe it! Get out of my sight, all of you! Dare to breathe a word of this outside and I will send the lot of you to jail—yes, all of you!" and he glared at the countess. "There is only one way to deal with a conspiracy of this kind, and by—"

he uttered an awful oath, "I'll do it; yes, though you are my own mother! Do you hear? Leave the room, all of you, and repeat your lies elsewhere at your peril! What! I this woman's son!" and he laughed again.

The countess looked at him for a moment in silence; then she raised her hand and pointed to the mirror that hung on the wall in front of him.

"Look at her and at that," she said solemnly.

Seymour glanced at Martha Hooper and then at the glass.

Her face, white and drawn, the pale eyes, the thin lips—the whole expression and every feature seemed reflected from his face in the glass.

It came upon him with the force of a thunder-bolt. He uttered a cry and clutched at the table, still glaring at her face—his own—that stared back at him.

"You're right, my lady, he takes after the old woman rather than me. Bad taste on his part, I call it."

The harsh vulgar voice roused Seymour from his stupor. He shuddered and sank into the chair, passing his hand over his trembling lips.

Martha crept up to him slowly, her face working, and timidly laid her hand on his shoulder.

"I am sorry," she murmured brokenly.

Seymour drew away from her with a look of horror.

"Don't—don't dare to touch me!" he said. "I don't believe a word of it!"

"I know why you have concocted this fraud!" he said hoarsely; "you want to put that beast Royce in my place. You have always hated me! You know it! I have known it! It is for Royce you have hatched this plot! But you'll find yourself disappointed!" He drew himself up. "I am the Earl of Landon! Take your vile story into a court of law, and even though you may get a dozen sensible men to believe you—which is impossible—you convict yourself of a crime for which there is a heavy punishment."

"No punishment can be heavier than that which I have borne since the first hour of my deception," said the countess calmly.

Seymour was silent a moment, then his face brightened.

"If you don't consider yourself and your own reputation you'll think of Royce," he said triumphantly; "you must care that he should know that his mother was nothing better than an imposter and a thief! Though, and he laughed scornfully, "seeing how he has sunk, perhaps it won't matter. His wife's relations would not think much of such a trifle as this which you say you have done. Bah!" he laughed defiantly. "What can you do? Suppose this cock-and-bull story were true, what can you do? You can't, for shame's sake—for your dear Royce's sake—make it known to the world! So you see, my dear mother—he stopped and bit his lip, and glanced under his brows at Martha Hooper—"it will come to nothing. I don't think I shall have to defend my title and estates in a court of law."

They were all silent and after a moment of enjoyment he went on:

"Royce will never be the earl, my dear madam; I shall marry without delay—I shall marry Irene! Stop!" for the countess had opened her lips, "I know what you are going to say—that you will tell her this stupid story. Do so at your peril! The moment any of you open his or her lips I prosecute for conspiracy!"

They were silent for a moment as his laugh of defiance rang through the room; then Jake's voice broke in harshly:

"Bravo! Very well done indeed! But you forget me, your own father, my dear boy! You forget your poor old father—no words can describe the cunning mockery in the tone—and poor's the word, too! I'm so poor that I shall have to go to the workhouse, 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 go to the workhouse, but they don't give relief while you've got an able-bodied son who can support you, and that's what I've got. You can't have me punished for conspiracy 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 extremities. I'm a gentleman—like yourself, my boy—and when I'm treated like one I act on the square, by choice. These two ladies can settle which is the mother between 'em; 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-lined table, close to Seymour, who, with a look of loathing and hatred, edged his chair away. "You make an allowance—a good 'un. Oh, I'm as fond of a flutter at the green table as you are, and a paltry hundred or two wouldn't be any good to me; but give me, say a thousand a year, and I'll keep as mum 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. "Ha!" he exclaimed; "look at that!" and he pointed to a long cicatrice, which shone on the upper part of his arm.

"Don't struggle, my boy, I'm twice as strong as you are, old as I am! See that? That was done when you were a kid; one night your mother and I were amusing ourselves by throwing the cutlery about. There's the witness 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 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'll lose the day; sorry, because I—bless your heart!—don't want you to lose your 'lordship!' Nor I! Where would be the good of that to me? Where would be my thousand a year? See—there!" he dropped Seymour's benumbed arm.

Seymour gazed at him with mingled disgust and fear. Here was a cunning which more than equalled his own; and an audacity to which he could not 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?"

"No—nothing," stammered Seymour with a forced smile that made his haggard face grotesque. "I—I am transacting a little business with—"

with these good people, my dear Irene. Then as Irene drew back he looked round. "Not a word to—"

her, or—I will not make any terms with you. Leave the house, both of you!" He turned to Jake.

"Come here to-night—after dark, and I will see you. I make no promise. I do not believe a word of what I have heard; but—but to prevent scandal—"

"Of course you don't! That's the line 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 along, old lady," and he nodded to Martha.

She shrank 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 further calamity.

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 on the countess' face filled her with alarm.

"No!" said her ladyship 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 and trembled.

"Oh, madam, what is it you are saying?" she murmured. "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 cost be what it may. You will know the whole story of my wickedness presently, Irene; you will shrink from me then."

"Oh, no, never, never!" murmured Irene, pale with fright; for every

word the countess uttered went to increase 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 were, or dead! I am speaking the truth. Royce is my son—my only son; he is the earl. Bring him to me, and bring the countess—"

"The countess!"

"Yes, Madge!" said the elder woman. "I want to ask her forgiveness. For have I not 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 gypsy—stepped in between me and that man last night. No one saw it. But I saw it! She strove to save me—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's pause, then she turned her aching eyes on Irene.

"And you, too! I have sinned against you in my pride and greed of power. A week ago, and I would have stood silent and let him—him!" she shuddered—"marry you! Ah, you think I am mad! Where is Madge?"

The tears were running down Irene's cheeks.

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

"Gone!" echoed the countess. She sank on to the bed in her room and gazed up at Irene. "Yes, I might have known it. And it is I who have driven her away—I!" 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 that 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 fly for refuge, save for her own people? And that they were in the neighborhood, Jake's presence at the Towers 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 would never go back to Monk Towers. They would leave England, and make a home somewhere beyond the seas.

Then the 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, help and save her! 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 ostler take the horse—"

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

"Yes, plague take 'em, they was in Melbury Wood all last week, and may be there now."

Royce nodded and started again. Melbury Wood was nearly three miles distant, but the horse was a good one, and with the instinct of his kind seemed to know that an effort was expected of him. Royce had no need to touch him with the whip, and before many minutes had reached the woods.

A faint line of smoke rose from the leafless trees, and the sight awakened a gleam of hope in his breast. Madge must be there.

He rode straight into the midst of the camp.

Round the fire was the familiar group. Mother Katie looked round from her pot and uttered a cry of astonishment. The men rose, and the children ran with cries of delight to welcome "Master Jack!"

They gathered round the panting, steaming horse in silent amazement. Mother Katie came forward with her iron soup ladle in her hand.

"Mr. Jack!" she exclaimed; "you here!" Then she looked from the horse to Royce's white, worn face. "Madge! Something's happened."

A murmur rose from the men. One of them—it was Steve—uttered an oath.

"She is here," said Royce, hoarsely. "I want her! She is here, I know."

The group exchanged glances.

"Madge is not here," said Mother Katie, her ruddy face paling. "Why should she be?"

"Don't lie to me!" cried poor Royce. "You shall not hide her from me. I tell you she is here, I know it!"

Mother Katie looked up at him with a face full of apprehension and alarm.

"Madge is not here, Mr. Jack!" she said in a low voice. "Isn't she with you up at the grand place there—the Towers?"

"No!" said Royce. "She left—I can't explain. If you won't take me to her, go and tell her I am here; that—that I want her. Tell her, if she hesitates to see me, that she is not to go back to the Towers—"

"Not to go back! Why not?" said Katie.

Royce set his teeth.

"For God's sake don't stand there

asking questions. I can't tell you! Go and tell her—"

Steve pushed his way to the front, close up to the horse.

"You can't tell, eh?" he said. "You needn't try. We can guess well enough. Why should she leave you if you and yours hadn't ill-treated her? I know it 'ud come to that sooner or later. I knew she'd be glad to come back to us. She ain't here yet, and if she was you shouldn't have her, curse you! Yes, curse you! What have you been doing to her? Beating her, I shouldn't wonder!"

"I'll find her for myself. Stand back, Steve! Don't let any one touch me!" and he glared round, his teeth set hard. "Stand back! You mean well, but you don't know, don't understand—"

"Oh, we understand well enough," said Steve, "and I say that if she was here you shouldn't have her."

Royce pushed him aside, but Steve sprang on him, and in an instant the two men were locked together.

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

Seymour was a really admirable hypocrite, an accomplished liar, and as unscrupulous as a Choctaw Indian; but he lacked two qualities which are indispensable to the successful villain—he wanted courage and temperance.

He sat for hours in the library trying to face the situation and screw up his courage, but it would not be screwed up. Most men in his position would have determined to show fight. After all, possession is nine points of the law, and he was very much in possession.

That he should have to fight he was convinced, for he knew the countess well enough to feel that, having made confession of her fraud, she would not rest until Royce had gained his rights. Now Seymour could fight then it was true—could succeed, perhaps; and, hating him, at any rate keep Royce out of the title and estates for years. But to fight with Royce would cost money; the latter Seymour did not possess. He was up to his neck in debts, gambling and others, and at that moment had his pockets full of dunning letters. If he could have married Irene, and secured her fortune, all would have been well with him, but he knew there was no chance of that now. Though he had asked the countess not to tell her, he knew that her ladyship would do so. No, he had no money, and his chance of marrying Irene was gone forever. Then his courage. As he walked feverishly up and down the room, or dropped into a chair, continually taking long drinks of brandy and soda—whether walking or sitting—he pictured the consequences of a fight. Everything would come out. It would be known that he frequented gambling dens, it would be known that he was the son of a low-born scoundrel; all the papers would give sensational accounts of the case, and he would be held up to the world as a hypocrite and imposter. He shuddered as he remembered that he was engaged to address a meeting at Exeter Hall the night after next. Perhaps, if he decided to fight the countess' story would have become public by that time, and he pictured himself standing before the vast audience—a declared fraud!

As the day glided by he knew that he should not be able to face the storm of obloquy and ridicule. Then what should he do? The rain beat against the window, the wind howled and he sat and listened to them; and drank, pondered and fumed. If he could only silence the three witnesses! But it was impossible. Jake he could perhaps bribe; a thousand—two thousand a year would be as nothing compared with the vast rent-roll; and he would give twice two thousand for the mere pleasure of keeping Royce out of his rights. But though it might be easy to bribe Jake, his father!—he shuddered at the thought of the relationship—it was impossible to bribe the countess; and, he felt, quite as impossible to bribe Martha Hooper—his mother. His mother! As he realized the truth he grew almost mad and absolutely desperate.

If he had lived in the good old, high-handed days Seymour would not have hesitated in putting the three persons out of the way, by poison or otherwise; but that mode of getting out of the difficulty was, unfortunately, not open to him; modern society having a prejudice against murderers and carrying it to the extent of hanging them. But though he could no more have screwed up his courage to commit a murder than he could walk the tight-rope, Seymour felt very much like a murderer as he covered lower and lower in the chair, and grew more and more desperate.

The servants knew he was there; but though no one came to luncheon, Irene being with the countess and the doctor, they did not dare for some time to go to him.

At last the butler ventured to the library with a cup of tea.

Seymour unlocked the door and glowered at him.

"Tea? No!" he said huskily. "Bring me some champagne!"

Then he sank into the chair again and drank the champagne. He ought to have been intoxicated by this time, but in certain conditions of mind alcohol loses some of its effect, and the wine only aroused Seymour's spirits a little. In a very little time Jake would be here again. What should he say to him?

It was dark at five. He lit a candle, and sat in the dim light waiting. The clock struck six, and a few minutes afterward there came a tap at the window.

With a shudder Seymour got up

and opened it, and Jake entered. He wore a long ulster and a traveling sash with ears, and looked as complete a vagabond as one could desire to see.

"Well, my lord," he said, with an emphasis on the title, and a knowing leer, "here I am." He looked around the room. "Been taking a drop to keep your spirits up? Quite right, I'll take a glass of sparkling myself, as you're so pressing." He stretched out a grimy hand and filled himself a glass. "Here's a health and long life to your lordship," he remarked cordially as he threw the wine down his throat. "And now to business. What's your lordship going to do? But I needn't ask the question. You're too sensible and up to snuff to kick up a dust when it'll choke yourself worse nor anybody else. Mum's the word for all of us, eh? As for me, as I said, you can depend upon me. I'm a gentleman—"

Seymour broke in hoarsely. The harsh, vulgar voice filled him with loathing.

"I have decided," he said, though until that moment he had not done so; "I do not believe your story. It is a conspiracy—"

"Right! That's your lay?" assented Jake approvingly. "Stick to that, and you're right. All you've got to do is to keep me quiet, and you're as safe as a basket of eggs."

It was not a very happy comparison, but Seymour did not notice its grotesque applicability.

"If I consent to make you an allowance," he said slowly, fingering his wine glass—he could not fill it for this man had just drunk out of it—"If I consent to—"

to come to terms with you, how am I to be sure that you will not continually harass and annoy me?"

"A man who gets a thousand a year isn't such a fool as to risk losing it. I shan't trouble you. I shall leave England, and swell it somewhere on the Continent. Barring a receipt for the coin every half-year, you won't hear from your affectionate father, my lord."

Seymour affected to ponder for a minute or two, then he sighed:

"It is a large sum of money, and to give you any goes against my conscience."

Jake put his finger to his cheek and grinned.

"But I will assent to your terms."

"Right!" exclaimed Jake extending his dirty paw. "Give us your hand on it. And I'll take the first half-year in advance, my lord."

Seymour took a check-book from the drawer.

His promptness made Jake suspicious.

"I don't like checks," he said sullenly, "they're too easily traced."

"Do you think I keep five hundred pounds lying loose in my pockets?" said Seymour.

Jake gawped at his lip and scowled at him.

"I'd go about with my pockets crammed with gold if I was in your place, my son," he said.

"I haven't a sovereign," he said quietly. "If you object to a check I will get the money from the bank, and send it to you in the morning!"

"No," said Jake after a moment. "I'll come for it. I'm not afraid of you running away," and he grinned.

Seymour leaned back and looked straight before him.

"Very well. I have no more to say."

"But I have just one thing," said Jake. "I want those sparklers Madge gave me. Like a fool I left 'em on the table this morning. But I was flurried by the women. I'll take 'em now, my lord, please."

Seymour remembered sweeping the diamonds into a drawer after he had been left alone.

"That is unfortunate," he said. "The countess took them away with her."

Jake's face darkened and he swore. "They're mine!" he said. "Madge gave 'em to me, and I mean to have them."

Seymour shrugged his shoulders.

"You may have them for all I care," he said; "they are not my property. I will get them for you to-morrow, if I can."

"You'd better," said Jake significantly. "I reckon they're worth a heap. I'll take 'em with the five hundred; both together or none at all."

"Very well," assented Seymour wearily; "at twelve to-morrow."

Jake glanced at him suspiciously. He had not expected to find his victim so ready and acquiescent. But after all, what else could Seymour do than cave in?

"Right!" he said with affected cheerfulness. "I'll drop in at twelve. Good-night, my lord. I'll take another glass of wine, though, and a cigar if you've got it."

Seymour pushed a box of cigars across the table, and Jake took one and lit it at the candle, and emptied the rest into his pockets.

"Good-night," he said. "If you'll take my advice you'll cut that for to-night"—he nodded at the bottle—"and get to bed early. You want to keep your head cool, you know."

Seymour took no notice, and with a nod, Jake went out.

Seymour locked the window after him and paced up and down. His brain was working on a new tack. Jake's request for the diamonds and his remark about "running away," had started an idea.

Besides the diamonds lying in the drawer, the whole of the Landon jewels, which had been got from the bank for the ball, were in the house.

(To be Continued.)