

Skin Deep

by Tom S. Elrod

IT'S a mighty good thing, I suppose, that physicians and lawyers actually regard as confidential the very many stories told them of domestic difficulties. And, by the same token, it is equally fortunate that nearly every nurse worthy of bearing the name, regards confidences from the same viewpoint. Having been a nurse for in the neighborhood of a dozen years, I've had my share of experiences, and my mind has been burdened with a great deal of confidential information—some gay, most of it grave.

I've been carrying around this story of Luella Whittier and Stewart Coval for five years now and, whatever the ethics of the profession may be, I am going to tell it. The time has come when I simply have to take somebody into my confidence if I am to have any peace of mind. So I leave it up to you who listen to it to decide. Of course, I've changed their names and omitted the name of the city where they lived. A few people may recognize them from my descriptions, but I am not so very much afraid of that. The thing I fear is your condemnation after you've heard the whole thing.

After I had graduated from training school I took up institutional work, but the pay was not very high, the hours were long, and there was a young surgeon stationed there who made life miserable to me. He thought he was in love with me, and I thought he was only in love with the idea of being in love. Anyhow, I quit and took up private practise; and as for the surgeon, well, I haven't heard of him in a good many years. But anyhow, he has nothing to do with this story.

A nurse who goes to private homes gets a clearer insight into human nature than the nurse who remains in an institution. Sometimes a hospital patient will change his method of

thinking just because his environment has been changed; but take him at home, and if you are inclined to look below the surface, you will find out the actual workings of his mind in a little while.

I had been summoned to the Whittier home, partly as a sort of companion to Mrs. Whittier, who was going to die and knew it, and partly to keep an eye on old Samuel Whittier, who was rich—and knew it. Also he had a lazy liver, and his motto seemed to be “Eat, drink, and be wary, for to-morrow we digest.” But while Mrs. Whittier required a great deal of attention and Whittier himself was nearly always needing something for his digestive organs, the most important member of the household was Luella.

From her mother Luella inherited her good looks, and from her father she inherited a nervous disposition. So it required the services of a pretty active maid to keep the wrinkles from appearing in her forehead because of her constant habit of frowning over things that most of us would consider very trivial.

Luella was about the only girl I ever knew who could be called beautiful and still have the truth told about her. Naturally, I saw a great deal of her, and she fell into the habit of telling me her troubles.

She had the whitest skin I ever saw; lips that made my heart ache for the fellow who fell in love with her; hair that was as sunny as her disposition was cloudy, and a form that made me unconsciously turn up my nose in scorn at the pictures of these perfect women the newspapers always are featuring as having won some physical-culture contest or other.

And Luella realized, you might say, that her physical beauty was her stock in trade. So, of

course, she began to worry for fear she would lose it; that is, soon after Stewart Coval began to pay attention to her.

"I've come to look upon you a good deal as I would a sister," she told me, "although I doubt if I should tell even a sister some of the things I've told you. But you realize, Dorothy (that's my name), I'm not on the same intellectual plane with Stewart. He reads all sorts of books that I do not even begin to understand; he has a theory of living that is beyond me, and at the same time he tells me he loves me. I'm afraid he's simply fallen in love with my face, and that in a few years, when I begin to fade, he'll find out he's made a horrible mistake."

I told her to look at her mother—a woman who had been ill for twenty years—and whose cheeks still retained their youthful bloom.

"You will be almost as good looking at fifty as you are now," I insisted, "and you ought to realize that. Take care of yourself; stop worrying; try to make this man a dutiful wife, and let yourself love him without constantly looking for trouble around the corner. If he's as intellectual as you think, perhaps he has found that you are brighter than you suspect. Anyhow, the surest way to grow old and ugly is to keep on stewing about something imaginary."

But although she always brightened up after I had hauled her over the coals, so to speak, she generally found something new to worry about the next day.

Many a night, when I was flitting around to turn Mrs. Whittier's pillow or get the old gentleman a hot-water bottle, she would dismiss her maid and call me into her room. For hours she would sit there before the mirror ready for bed and study her face. She would make me examine her skin with a reading-glass to see if it was too coarse; she made me investigate every fancied beauty-evil to which a young woman might fall heir. And after I had patted her lovely shoulders, smoothed her troubled brow, and bundled her off to bed, she would insist that I tell her over again that I thought she never would grow positively ugly.

"See here," I said one night after I had been having a particularly trying day, "I am getting completely out of patience with you. If I had your looks I'd hook a husband or go on the stage or

pose for advertisements, or do something to capitalize my beauty. You're the prettiest girl I ever saw in my life, and yet all your beauty gets you is a constant round of worry from morning until night for fear you'll lose it."

"But I'm afraid, I'm so afraid," she sobbed, which was no way of keeping her eyes in trim. "Every time I talk to Stewart, I realize he surely must know I am not his equal. He has so many ideas and so many activities in life that I don't seem to be able to share with him, and I am positive he just cares for me because he thinks I'm good looking. I don't want to be his doll, I want to be a help to him, to take a place in his life and help him grow— Oh, I don't know what to do. I'm the most miserable girl in the world!"

And to think she was twenty-two years old, beautiful as I have indicated, and had a man begging her on bended knees—I caught a glimpse of that one night—to marry him and let him make her happy. Sometimes I wanted to spank her; I didn't know of any other method that would accomplish the same results.

Even with all the fretting she did about her beauty, she wasn't vain. She seemed to think that Providence had been kind to her in a temporary sort of way, and that she was doomed to bloom like some precious flower, and then simply wither into nothingness.

There were times when I considered going to Coval—I had begun to know him pretty well—and advise him to carry her off by main strength and awkwardness, because it seemed that she never was going to consent to marry him. It was getting to be a pretty serious matter with Coval, too, because she never had told him the real reason for her constant refusals, and although he loved her or at least appeared to, he began to show signs of insisting on a definite answer. Night after night she repeated their conversations to me, and begged for advice; but, of course, the only advice I could give her was to take the risk and try matrimony.

"Suppose you do go blind in one eye, or one ear grows larger than the other, or a thousand other things happen to you, why don't you have nerve enough to take a chance?" I wanted to know. "Do you think you will get more satisfaction out of sitting around here eating your heart out and still keeping your beauty, or

wouldn't it be better to marry him, and then trust to luck?"

At that she always replied in the same old way—that she was afraid to try it; that something terrible might happen to her, and then she would awaken to the realization that he didn't care for her any more.

I've noticed that people who borrow trouble nearly always pay a pretty high rate of interest, and those who are constantly in fear that something will happen to them generally have at least a portion of their fears come true.

Luella's looks actually began to fade a little. Not that she lost her beauty, or that the change was enough for most people to notice; but, you see, I had to make these minute wrinkle-hunts every few nights, and I could tell that a change was taking place. Luella seemed to sense it, too. She took long walks, fenced, changed her diet, and did everything the beauty-books recommend; but all that was so much time wasted.

Then, one day, when I had been in the Whittier home about a year without a vacation and had been ministering to the wants of three people pretty much all the time, I began to get a little jumpy myself, so I arranged for a relief nurse to take my place while I tried to forget Mrs. Whittier's fancied ills, Mr. Whittier's stomach-ache, and Miss Whittier's heartache for the time being.

I left my address with the family so I could be called if there was any thing urgent; but I had given the new nurse the most explicit directions, had bullied the three members of the family into trying to brace up and look upon life through brighter glasses for a little while. Consequently I left the house with a fairly light heart, determined to really rest and invite my soul.

As it happened, the invitation to my soul had to be recalled, and all mental entertainment canceled. I had no more than become fairly comfortable in a ramshackle old hotel that overlooked the sea; had gone down to the beach to try and forget there were such things as thermometers, hot-water bottles, clean sheets, record charts, and all such things, when a spindle-legged little girl came running after me and said that a telegram had been telephoned out from the village. She had taken it down, and this is what she read:

Luella terrible burned. Probably disfigured for life. Wants you to come. Answer.

The new nurse's name was signed. I hurried back to the hotel and began to pack after I had sent a message that I would be there as soon as steam could bring me. All the way back to the city where Luella lived I kept thinking over and over that people who fear a certain thing often live to realize the fear was something real, after all. In a good many ways I was very fond of Luella, and I realized that if she was burned enough to have her beauty spoiled, she simply would refuse to even let Coval ever see her again. And that, I knew, would result in making her life one long, continuous nightmare of misery.

When I arrived at the Whittier home I expected to find a string of motor-cars in front of the house, because I never suspected but that Luella would have all the physicians in the city striving to do everything in their power to save her beauty. But I was surprised to find the house more quiet than usual. I hurried up-stairs when I was admitted, and the new nurse met me in the hall just outside Luella's room. She was looking pale and haggard and I could imagine what she had been through.

"She is sleeping now," she whispered as she came toward me on her toes.

"How did it happen?" I wanted to know.

"Well," the nurse began, "it seems she had read some where that alcohol would do wonders as a skin food, although I confess I never heard of such a thing before. She had a big bottle of it on her dressing-table and was pouring it on her hands and then rubbing it on her face. You know, the house has both gas and electricity, and in order to get some additional light she struck a match and reached for the gas-jet. Mind you, I was in another part of the house at the time, and all I know is just what she has been telling me. But anyhow, the alcohol caught fire and burned her hands, arms, shoulders, and face. Some of the burns appear to be pretty deep, and she has suffered a great deal"

"What doctor did you call?"

"That's the worst part of it," she continued; "she is almost insane because she has lost her good look, and so far she has refused to have anybody on the place. She had rushed to her medicine-chest and dabbed some kind of cooling cream on her face and had wound bandages

around her head when I came in and found out what had happened. She is afraid the news will kill her mother, and she does not want her father to know because she thinks he has enough to worry about. And she absolutely refused to allow a doctor on the place. She says she knows she is marked for life, and she never wants to see a living soul again except you.”

“How deep do you think the burns really are?” I asked her.

She hesitated a moment and flushed.

“To tell the truth, I don’t know,” she replied. “You know, I’m near sighted, and while I can see well enough with my close glasses to read a thermometer and do my other work, I can’t answer your question because I had left my close glasses in Luella’s room, and in her excitement she knocked them off a stand and broke them. I know she’s burned and that she’s in a serious condition, but with these spectacles I’m wearing now I’ve been unable to make a thorough examination.”

I heard some one moving in Luella’s room and hurried in there, the nurse following me. Luella began to have a regular old-fashioned case of hysterics when she saw me, and clamored for the new nurse to go out and leave us alone. I began turning on lights, but she screamed, and said the light would kill her, that she never wanted anything but darkness again, and ran on like that until I forced some quieting medicine down her throat.

To tell the truth, the girl did not have a very prepossessing look. Her head was swathed in bandages, put on rather crudely because she had dressed the burns herself. I could see a splotch of red peeping out where a piece of the gauze winding had slipped down. My heart sank when I saw that, because I realized it must be a case of good-by, beauty, which, in her situation, was the same as farewell happiness.

“Oh, I shudder to think of what Stewart will do when he finds out about it,” she cried over and over. “I don’t know what to do, I don’t know what to do. I’ve kept it from father and mother until you came, because I thought you could advise me. What shall I do, what shall I do?”

“Well, in the first place,” I said, “I am going to telephone Mr. Coval and tell him what has happened. He’s in love with you and has a right to

know. Then I am going to call a physician. The idea of you refusing to let any one see you is the most idiotic thing I ever heard of. It wouldn’t surprise me if you had let this thing go so long now that even a specialist will have trouble in doing anything for you.”

At first she declared she would die of shame if Coval came to see her; but I sat down by the bed, got hold of her bandaged hands and held them. Then I did some arguing. I went over the whole situation from first to last, and I repeated it every little while just to have something more to say. I told her what I thought of the new nurse for allowing her to have her own way. I told her how foolish she always had been. Perhaps I was a little cruel, but I had stood her silliness for about a year, and I really thought it was my time to talk.

“But Stewart of all people,” she moaned. “Oh, I can’t, I simply can’t. He never loved anything but my beauty, and now it’s gone, and he may think he’s in duty bound to keep up his protestations anyway. Oh, I wish I knew; if I only *did* know maybe I could rest a little.”

I rearranged the bandages in spite of her protests, and finally she determined that if Coval was coming she must have it over right away. She demanded that I telephone for him before the doctor came. So I went down-stairs and telephoned. I told him I wanted to see him a moment before he saw Luella.

“It isn’t anything serious, is it?” he demanded, his voice getting a little shaky. “For God’s sake, tell me!”

But I hung up the receiver and waited. I was in no mood to discuss the situation over the telephone.

About ten minutes later I heard a motor coming down the street about seventy miles an hour, and I realized Coval was coming. He jumped for the door, and I met him. Then, as briefly as I could, for he was all impatience to get to Luella, I told him what had happened.

I went ahead to tell Luella he was coming, and although I didn’t linger in the room, I was there long enough to see him come rushing in, fall on his knees beside the bed, and begin to mutter all sorts of foolish love-talk. I told him he could only remain a few minutes, and went into the hall. The new nurse came to ask me where she could find something, and I had to go past the open door

of Luella's room.

"But my sweetheart, beauty is only skin deep after all," I heard him saying. To my notion he might have thought of something more original.

"Sometimes I've almost wished you were not so beautiful," he told her, "because your face has always more or less dazzled me, and I never could really appreciate you for yourself alone. And to think that you did not send for me right away! My dear, dear girl, how you must have suffered, if you care as you say you do and thought I would cease loving you simply because your face may be scarred."

I didn't mean to peep, but his time was up. He was leaning over and kissing as much of her face as was not covered by bandages.

"And you're really absolutely sure you love me anyhow?" she kept asking him.

"Honestly and truly," he answered. "It's *you* I love, not simply your face. And while I'm sorrier than words can express that this has happened, you can't blame me for being a little happy, too, because now I know you won't put me off any longer. Will you, dear?"

She gave a little happy sigh.

"No," she agreed; "now that I know you actually love me in spite of my ruined looks, why as soon as I am able to be up, we will be married."

He kissed her a few more times, and then I marched into the room and told him he must go. I followed him out and down the stairway.

In the lower hall he fished in his coat pocket a moment, drew out a bill-purse and handed me

two fifty-dollar bills. I began to expostulate, but he held up his hands for silence, then drew me into the library and pointed to a chair.

"The only thing I hate about this little transaction is that it's not more," he insisted. And after he had argued with me a little while I kept the money.

You see, it was like this. Luella never could be sure whether he loved her or was infatuated with her beauty. So she lighted some alcohol in a dish, smeared some red make-up on her face, tied on the bandages, broke the new nurse's glasses because she knew how near sighted the nurse was, and then began to stage her little play, not knowing whether it would be tragedy or comedy.

When I changed her bandages a trifle, some of the red paint came off on my fingers, and as soon as I had another chance I took a good look, and realized the game she was playing. I didn't know what Coval would do if he thought her beauty was spoiled, so I told him all about it before he went up-stairs to see her. I knew there was a chance of making two people happy that way, and so I did what I thought best.

They have been married quite a while now, and she doesn't know to this day that he realized she was playing a game when he hurried in to her bedside and worked off that old stuff about beauty being only skin deep. Anyhow the hundred helped me to have a good deal nicer vacation than I had originally planned. And I'll leave it up to you to say whether or not I did the proper thing.