

The Diamond Coterie

By LAWRENCE M. LYNCH
(E. M. Van Deventer)

Author of "A Woman's Crime," "John Arthur's Ward," "The Lost Witness," "A Slender Clue," "Dangerous Ground," "Against Odds," Etc., Etc.

(Continued)

"Never! My lips are unsealed from this hour; since you have dared to claim and take a share in my fate, and since I have not the courage to put so much happiness from me."

"Supposing it in your power?"

"Oh, I know better than to cope with you," smiling upon her fondly. "But my honor must be vindicated for your gracious sake, and—I must cease to be," with a sidelong glance, "Doctor Heath, from nowhere." Sit down, darling; my janitor is an accommodating fellow; he will not interrupt, nor shorten your stay, I am sure. I want to tell you my story. It is yours, together with all my other secrets."

She put up her hand, quickly.

"Not now," she said. "Not for a long time. I prefer you as I have known you; for me, you shall still be 'Doctor Heath, from nowhere.' Don't remonstrate; I will have it so; I will send Mr. O'Meara to you, and that odd Mr. Wedron; you shall tell them all about yourself."

"You will go to them? Constance, no; for your own sake, let us keep our love secret for a time; until this is ended, somehow. Think, my proud darling, how much it would spare you."

She turned toward him, her mouth setting into very firm lines, a resolute look in her eyes.

"Would it spare you anything?" she asked, quietly.

"I Oh, no. It is sacrifice for me; but, I wish to have it so. You must not visit me here. You must not let gossip say she has thrown herself away on an adventurer."

"I won't," she replied, sententiously; "I'd like to hear of anybody saying that! I'd excommunicate them, I'm going to close the mouths of gossips, by setting my seal of proprietorship upon you. I'm coming here every day; but, after this, I'll bring Aunt Honor, or Mrs. O'Meara with me. I'm going to say to every soul who names you to me: 'Doctor Heath is my affianced husband, defame him if you dare.' And I'm going straight to tell Mr. O'Meara that he must take your testimony against Frank Lamotte."

Constance kept her word. Before many days, the town rang with the news that Constance Wardour, in the face of the accusation against him, had announced her engagement to Doctor Clifford Heath.

Then a hush fell upon the aristocratic gossips of W—, and mischievous tongues were severely bridled. It was not wise to censure too freely a man whom the heiress of Wardour had marked with her favor.

The lawyers found their client in a mood much more to their liking, and O'Meara scribbled down in his book long sentences caught from the lips of Clifford Heath, who was now a strong helper, and apt in suggestions for the defense.

He opened for them the sealed up pages of his past life.

He told them in detail, all that he had briefly stated to Constance, concerning Frank Lamotte, and more.

Every day now they were in close consultation, and every day the Wardour carriage drove at a stated hour, first to Mapleton, where it took up Constance, and then to the prison, where, accompanied by her aunt, or her guardian's wife, the heiress passed a half hour in the cell of her lover.

She still clung to the hope that the accumulating evidence against Frank Lamotte might break the chain that bound him, and open his prison doors; but, one day, a week after her first visit to the prison, Mr. O'Meara dashed this hope to atoms.

"We can bring no criminal accusation against Lamotte," he said. "The examination proved that John Burrill was killed as early as eleven o'clock that night, and investigation has proven that Lamotte remained at home all that evening, and was heard moving about in his room until after midnight. I'm terribly sorry, Constance, but the case stands just about as it did at first, and the odds are still against Heath. He will have to stand his trial."

The girl's heart sank like lead, and as the days passed on and no new developments could be evolved from a case which began to assume a most gloomy aspect, her position in the Lamotte household became unbearable.

Sybil had changed a very little, but for the better. Her fits of raving were less frequent, and almost always to be anticipated. So, worn in body and tortured in mind, Constance went back to Wardour, and, save for her daily visits to the prison, was in visible to all her friends.

And she did not suffer alone. Knowing her love for Clifford Heath and the terrible secret she carried in her bosom, Mrs. Lamotte lived in an anguish of suspense.

"Would love outweigh honor?" If the worst should come, could she trust Constance Wardour? Could she trust herself?

In those tortured hours, the same prayer went up from the heart of both mother and friend—that Sybil Lamotte would die!

While these things were making the world a weariness to Constance, Jerry Belknap, in his character of prospecting horse jockey, took up his quarters in a third rate hotel near the river, and remained very quiet in fancied security, until he became suddenly enlightened as to the cause of his ill success, as follows:

Lounging near the hotel one day, he was accosted by a stranger, who tapped him familiarly on the shoulder, saying:

"I have seen you in the prison, Mr. Wedron, after all his labor, and his seeming interest, is unaccountably absent; unaccountably, at least, so far as the opposition, the prisoner, the judge, jury, and all the spectators are concerned. Mr. O'Meara seems not at all disturbed by his absence, and evidently understands all about it."

Near the prisoner sits a man who causes a buzz of inquiry to run through the entire audience.

He is tall, fair haired, handsome; the carriage of his head, the haughtiness of his bearing, reminds more than one present of Clifford Heath, as they first knew him. He is a stranger to all W—, and "Who is he? Who is he?" runs from lip to lip.

The stranger is seemingly oblivious of the attention lavished upon him; he bends forward at times, and whispers a word to the prisoner, or his counsel, and he turns occasionally to murmur something in the ear of Constance Wardour, who sits beside him, grave, stately, calm.

She is accompanied by Mrs. Aliston and Mrs. O'Meara, and Ray Vandeyok sits beside the latter lady, and completes the party.

Mr. Lamotte is there, subdued, yet affable, and Frank, too, who is paler than usual, but quite self-possessed.

Near the party above mentioned, may be seen the two city physicians, but, and here is another cause for wonderment, Doctor Benoit is not present; and, who ever knew the good doctor to miss an occasion like this?

"Business must be urgent, when it keeps Benoit away from such a trial," whispers one gossip to another, and the second endorses the opinion of the first.

Sitting there, scanning that audience with a seemingly careless glance, Constance feels her heart sink like lead in her bosom.

She feels, she knows, that already in the minds of most her lover is a condemned man. She knows that the weight of evidence will be against him. They have a defense, it is true, but nothing will overthrow the fact that John Burrill went straight to the house of the prisoner, and was found dead hard by.

All along she has hoped, she knew not what, from Bathurst. But since he returned Sybil's note in so strange and abrupt a manner, she has had no word or sign from him, and now she doubts him, she distrusts everything.

But, little by little, day by day, she has been schooling her heart to face one last desperate alternative. Her lover shall be saved! Let the trial go on. Let the worst come. Let the fatal verdict be pronounced, if it must; after that, perish the Wardour honor. What if she must trample the heart out of a mother's breast? What if she must fling into the breach the life of a blighted, wronged, helpless, perhaps dying sister woman?

Hardening her heart, crushing down her pride, she muttered desperately on this last day of doubt and suspense.

"Let them all go. Let the verdict be what it may, Clifford Heath shall not suffer a felon's doom!"

Then she had nerve herself to calmness and gone to face the inevitable.

"Prisoner at the bar, are you guilty or not guilty?"

The reading of the indictment has turned all eyes upon the prisoner's face. He stands erect, his head haughtily poised, his clear dark eyes fixed fully upon the judge.

"I am not guilty, your honor."

A murmur runs through the court room. The stranger bends to whisper to Constance. The trial proceeds.

Once again all the evidence brought forward at the inquest is repeated—sworn to—dilated upon. Once again it presses the scales down, down, and the chances for the prisoner hang light in the balance.

One thing puzzles the prosecuting attorney, and troubles the mind of Jasper Lamotte.

O'Meara, the shrewd, the fox-like—O'Meara, who never lets pass a flaw or a loophole for criticism; who never loses a chance to pick and torture and puzzle a witness, is strangely indifferent.

One by one the witnesses for the prosecution pass before him; little by little they build a mountain of evidence against his client. He declines to examine them. He listens to their testimony with the air of a bored play-goer at a very poor farce.

After the testimony of the two masons, comes that of the party who last saw John Burrill in life. They testify as they did at the inquest—neither more, nor less.

Then come the dwellers in Mill avenue. They are all there but Brooks and Nance Burrill.

"Your honor," says the prosecuting attorney, "two of our witnesses—two very important ones—are absent. Why they are absent, we do not know. Where they may be found, is a profound mystery."

"One of these witnesses, a man called Brooks, we believe to have been especially intimate with the murdered man. We think that he could have revealed the secret which the prisoner took such deadly measures to cover up. This man can not be found. He disappeared shortly after the murder."

"Our other witness vanished almost simultaneously. This other was the divorced wife of the murdered Burrill. She, too, knew too much. Now I do not intimate—I do not cast any stones, but there are some, not far distant, who could explain these two mysterious disappearances, 'an they would.'"

"An they will!" pops in the hitherto mute O'Meara. "They'll make several knotty points clear to your understanding, honorable sir."

A retort rises to his opponent's lips, and a wordy war seems imminent, but the crier commands "Order in the Court," and the two antagonists glare at each other mutely, while the trial moves on.

Frank Lamotte comes upon the witness stand. As before, he tells nothing new.

He was aware that his brother-in-law possessed some secret of Doctor Heath's. Did not know the nature of it, but inferred from words Burrill had let drop, that it was of a damaging character.

Upon being questioned as to his acquaintance with the prisoner, and what he knew of his disposition and temper.

He replies that he has known the prisoner since he first came to W—; liked him very much; never had any personal misunderstanding, although of late the prisoner had chosen to treat him with marked coldness.

As to his temper—well, he must admit that it was very fiery, very quickly roused, very difficult to control, he believed. Prisoner was by nature intolerant to a fault. He had shown this disposition in presence of witness on many occasions.

Being shown the knife found in the cellar, he examines it carefully, and pronounces it to be the one he has often seen in Doctor Heath's instrument case, or its precise counterpart.

This ends his testimony. O'Meara has no questions to ask, and Jasper Lamotte takes his son's place. He is the last witness for the prosecution.

He has less to say than any of the others.

He had heard of his son-in-law's encounter with Doctor Heath, of course; knew that a feud existed between them, could not so much as guess at the nature of it. The prosecuting attorney is about to dismiss him sans ceremony, when Mr. O'Meara, springs into sudden activity and announces his desire to examine the witness.

His opponent stares astonished, a murmur runs through the room; the Court bids him proceed.

"Mr. Lamotte," begins O'Meara, rising to his feet with provoking slowness, and then propounding his questions with a rapidity which leaves the witness no time for thought. "Mr. Lamotte, what can you tell us of this missing witness, Brooks?"

Mr. Lamotte stares in mute astonishment, then instinctively scenting danger ahead, he makes an effort to rally his forces that have been scattered by the lawyer's unexpected bomb.

"What do I know of the man Brooks?" he repeats slowly. "I don't comprehend you, sir."

"I asked a plain question," retorts the lawyer, crisply.

"I believe the man has been in my employ," ventures the witness, as if making an effort to recall some very insignificant personage.

"When?"

"That I do not remember, sir."

"Ah! Perhaps you have forgotten when last you saw this fellow, Brooks?"

"I think I saw him, for the last time, two days before my son-in-law was killed. I was at the depot, starting for the city. I think Brooks left town on the same train."

"And you have not seen him since?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Make an effort to think, sir. Brooks has been seen in W— since; it is known that he has visited Mapleton. Try to recall that visit."

Mr. Lamotte ponders and falls into the trap.

"A man came to Mapleton on the day of Mr. Burrill's funeral," he says, slowly. "I believe, upon reflection, that it was Brooks; he wished to see the body."

"Did you see this man on that occasion?"

"I did; for a moment only, he came to me with his request."

"You are sure this man was Brooks?"

"Not beyond a doubt. I was troubled, and busy. It was one of my factory hands; I think it was the man Brooks."

"Mr. Clerk," says O'Meara, turning suddenly to that functionary, "please take down Mr. Lamotte's statements. He is sure that it was the man Brooks."

CHAPTER XL

Over days, filled with weary waiting and marked by few incidents and no discoveries, we pass with one glance.

Clifford Heath's trial follows close upon his indictment. A month rolls away, and with the first days of winter comes the assembling of judge and jury, and his case is the first one called.

During the weeks that have intervened between his arrest and this day of his trial, Constance has been his bravest champion and truest friend; she has stimulated him to hope, and incited him to courage, with loving, cheerful words, while clinging desperately to a last remnant of her own sinking hope.

Day by day, during all this time, the ancient gig driven by Doctor Benoit, deposited that gentleman before the doors of Mapleton. Sybil's delirium had ended in a slow, wearisome fever, which left her, as the first frosts of winter touched the land, a white, emaciated shadow of her former self, her reason restored, but her memory sadly deficient.

She had forgotten that dark phase of her life in which John Burrill had played so sinister a part, and fancied herself back in the old days when her heart was light and her life unfettered. She had dropped a year out of that life, but memory would come back with strength, the doctor said; and Mrs. Lamotte dreaded the days when that memory should bring to her daughter's brow, a shadow never to be lifted; into her life a ghost never to be laid.

Evan, too, had narrowly escaped death at the hands of his rum demons; after four weeks filled with all the horrors attendant upon the drunkard's delirium, he came to his senses, hollow-cheeked, sunken eyed, emaciated, with his breath coming in quick, short gasps, and the days of his life numbered.

Brandy had devoured his vitals; late hours and protracted orgies had sapped his strength; constant exposure in all weather and at all hours had done its work upon his lungs.

"If he outlasts the winter, he will die in the spring," This was the doctor's ultimatum.

News from the outside world was strictly shut out from those sick ones. The name of John Burrill never was breathed in their presence, and both were ignorant of the fact that Clifford Heath, an old time favorite with each, was on trial for his life.

The morning that saw Clifford Heath quit his cell to take his place in the felon's dock and answer to the charge of murder, saw Sybil Lamotte lying upon a soft divan, before a merry winter fire. It was the first time since her illness that she had quitted her bed. And Evan, too, for the first time in many weeks, came with feeble, halting steps to his sister's room, and sitting near her, scanned her wasted features with wistful tenderness.

"Poor sis!" he murmured, stroking her hand softly. "We've had a pretty hard pull, you and I, but we're coming out famously." And then he added to himself, "More's the pity, so far as I am concerned."

"What made you ill, Evan?" she whispered feebly. "Was it worrying about me?"

A bright flush leaped to his cheeks and burned there hotly.

"Yes, it was about you, sis. But you will soon be as well and happy as ever, won't you?" anxiously.

"To be sure, Evan; we will both get well very fast. We have got so much to live for, and we are too young to die."

CHAPTER XLII

It is the opening hour of Clifford Heath's trial.

The court room is crowded to its utmost capacity; never has there occurred a trial there so intensely interesting to all W—.

The prisoner is a little paler, a little graver than his ordinary self. But is his ordinary self in every other respect; as proud of bearing, as self-possessed, as handsome, and distinguished as ever.

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(To be Continued.)

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