

# 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)

"He made some pretty loud threats," replied Ray, "and a fellow named Brooks, a sort of crony of Burrill's, took it upon himself to call upon Heath the next day, and advise him to keep a pretty close lookout for Burrill, as he was quite likely, in one of his drunken rages, to make an assault upon him. Heath thanked the fellow, and assured him that he was quite capable of taking care of himself, and Burrill, too, if need be; and Brooks backed out, declaring that he 'meant no arm by intruding'."

"Ray," said Constance, earnestly, "John Burrill is not the only man Doctor Heath has to fear. I may have acted hastily in sending for you, but I was so troubled by certain facts that have just come to my knowledge, that I could not rest without doing something. It's almost an abuse of confidence to ask so much of you and tell you so little, but in a few days I hope to be mistress of my own tongue, and then you shall have all the particulars. For the present, Ray, promise to follow my instructions blindly."

"I have promised that, Conny."

"And, Ray, you will keep this all a secret; you will do your part without hinting to Doctor Heath your true motive, unless circumstances compel an explanation?"

"I promise that, too."

"When I sent for you, it was to ask you to warn Doctor Heath. In the most delicate way you can devise, that he was menaced by an enemy, and under hourly surveillance; but, since you have told me of this Burrill it occurs to me that in some way he may be mixed up in this matter, and—I have thought of a better plan."

Ray nodded, and looked full of interest.

"Your description of his manner of receiving Burrill's interference, and of his reticence throughout, makes me feel that it might be only precipitating a catastrophe if we warned him, and oh, Ray, I want you, for three days, to be his constant shadow. Devise some excuse for remaining in town; thrust yourself upon his hospitality; observe any strangers who may approach him. If possible, do not let him get out of sight, even for a short time; in three days you shall be relieved."

"By whom?"

She lifted her hand, warningly. "No questions, Ray. Can you manage all this?"

He pondered a while, then said: "I think I can; I am a pretty good actor, Conny. What do you say to my feigning illness?"

"He would find you out."

"Not if I did it well, perhaps. I think I could manage for a few days."

"It won't do, Ray. He would send you to bed and walk away and leave you."

Ray groaned.

"Tell him your room is under repairs, and throw yourself on his mercy; then feign low spirits, and make him think it is his duty to entertain and cheer you up."

"Capital, Conny! we can make that work I know; your wit is worth more than my wisdom; for three days then I am your watch dog."

"And your friend's guardian."

"Precisely. I begin to swell with importance. But seriously, Conny, let me have your confidence at the earliest moment. For whoever does battle with Heath, will find me arrayed against him, and—it's difficult fighting in the dark."

"You shall know all as soon as possible, Ray, and now—"

"And now," repeated he, rising with alacrity. "Heath's horse stands outside, and Heath himself waits my return; so, lest he should grow impatient, and go where mischief awaits him, I will go now and begin my task."

"Thank you, Ray, I know I can depend upon you. All this seems like a scene out of a melodrama, but it's wretchedly real for all that. Ray, I am just waking up to a knowledge of how much plotting and wickedness there is in this world; even in our little world of W—."

"We all wake to that knowledge," he said, a spasm of pain crossing his face. "You know how the lesson came to me, Conny."

"Yes, poor Ray! and I know that another suffer even more than you, because of it."

"And the cause of it all is another mystery. But no more of this; unless something noteworthy occurs, you will not see me again for three days."

She gave him her hand, and a look of gratitude, and trust; and, in a few moments more, the red roan steed was speeding back toward ward.

Francis Lamotte had found the doctor dull company; and, as he scarcely ever remained in the office to read now-a-days, he had taken himself and his dissatisfaction elsewhere, long before Ray returned to the office ready to begin his new role. He found the doctor sitting in a despondent attitude, almost where he had left him, holding in his hand a crumpled letter.

Without appearing to notice his abstraction, Ray came at once to the point at issue.

"Heath," he said, "your red roan is returned to you, and the loan of him encourages me to ask another favor."

"Well!" said the doctor, without looking up or changing his attitude.

"The fact is," said Ray, with splendid

ingenuousness, "I am a sort of outcast. My quarters are undergoing that misery they call 'repairs,' and—the truth is, Heath, I want you to tender me your hospitality, for, say, two or three days. I can't go to a public place; I don't feel like facing the music, for I am a little sore yet, and I find that that I still an object for commiseration, and I do get low spirited in spite of myself. It's cheeky, my asking it, I know, and you'll find my constant society a terrible bore; but my heart is set on quartering with you, so don't say no, Heath."

Clifford Heath threw off his listlessness and looked up with his usual cheery smile.

"Why, Ray, you young dog," he cried, "you beseech me like a veritable tramp, just as if you were not as welcome as the sunshine; come along, you shall share my bed, and board, and—I'll be hanged if you shan't share the daily dose of abuse I have to take from my old housekeeper. I'll make a special arrangement to that effect."

"Thanks, Heath," replied Ray, and then he turned to the window to hide the fire that burned in his cheeks, because of the deceit he was practicing upon this open-hearted friend. "But it's all for his benefit," he thought; "at least I hope so."

"Well!" said the doctor, moving uneasily in his chair; "I hope your mission prospered."

"Oh, yes," carelessly.

"You—found Miss Wardour well, I hope?"

"Quite well; only wanting my valuable assistance in a little scheme she has on foot, a sort of benefit affair." And Ray congratulated himself on the adaptability of his answer.

"Is it too late to drive, Heath?"

But the doctor made no answer to this question, nor did he seem to hear it. Rising, he walked to the window, looked down thoughtfully into the street for a moment, then without turning, he said:—

"Rumor says that Miss Wardour will marry Lamotte."

"Yes."

"Lamotte just now made the statement."

"Ah!" contemptuously. "It's like him to boast; but I'm afraid he tells the truth; Constance admitted as much to me to-day."

A long time Clifford Heath stood motionless and silent at the window; then turning as if spurred by some sudden thought he threw the crumpled note, which all the time had been clasped in his hand, upon the table between them, saying:—

"Here's a mystery, sir; read that and pass your opinion on it; as you are to become my guest, you should know what society you will find yourself in."

Ray eyed the letter with his head on one side.

"What is it?" he asked in a stage whisper.

"A note, a billet doux, a solemn warning; came under the door a little while ago, while I was off in a reverie; came by a spirit hand, maybe, for I never heard a sound, but there lay the letter waiting to be observed and perused."

And the doctor laughed contemptuously, and turned away to prepare for his drive. But Ray's face lengthened perceptibly, and he took up the note with sudden eagerness, and read:—

"Doctor Heath—Take the advice of a friend and leave W—for a time; a plot is ripening against you, and your only safety lies in your absence, for your enemies are powerful and have woven a chain about you that will render you helpless, perhaps ruin you utterly."

"TRUTH."

"Lose no time, for the blow will soon fall."

The note was written in a cramped, reversed hand, and, after a hasty perusal, Ray bent his head and scanned the pen strokes closely, then he looked up with all the color gone from his face, and a strange gleam in his eyes.

"How—how do you say this came, Heath?"

"I didn't say, for I don't know, my lad. It made its first appearance lying just there," and the doctor pointed with his wispy broom, which he had been vigorously applying to a brown overcoat, at the spot just inside the door where he had first perceived the letter, and then resumed his occupation without observing the trouble in Ray's face. "Sensational, isn't it? but I can't think of quitting W— just as it begins to grow interesting."

"Then you take no stock in this warning?"

"Bah! why should I?"

"But if you should have secret foes?"

"Let them come on," quoted the doctor, theatrically; "bring along that precious document, Ray, and come along yourself."

Ray Vandyke, still looking troubled and anxious, arose, and, with lagging steps, followed his friend; as he noted with a new curiosity the tall, lithe, well knit figure striding on before him, the handsome, haughtily poised head, and the careless indifference of mien, he asked himself:—

"What can it be, this mystery and danger that surrounds him, that has caused Constance Wardour to take such unprecedented measures to insure his safety, and has wrung from Sybil Lamotte this strangely worded, oddly and ineffectually disguised warning?" for

Ray, seeing not as the world sees, but with the eyes of love, had recognized in the strange scrawl the hand of the woman he had loved and lost.

"Heath is in some peril," thought he, and then, with a rueful sigh, "Oh! I would risk dangers too to be watched over by two such women."

## CHAPTER XXII.

The three days that followed were days of unrest to Constance Wardour. The intangible, yet distinctly realized trouble, and fear, and dread, were new experiences in her bright life.

The mystery round about her, her inability to cope with the unknown, the inaction, the waiting, was almost more than she could calmly endure; and all this distress of mind and unrest of body was for others. Personally, she had nothing to fear, nothing to annoy her; but the warm-hearted heiress made a friend's cause her own. From the first she had grieved over the sad fate of Sybil Lamotte; not lightly, not as society sorrows over the fall of its proteges; but deeply, from her heart of hearts. And now there was added to this, her concern for Clifford Heath, and the danger that menaced him tormented her.

If her own honor were threatened she could not have been more troubled and full of fear; for in rebellion, in self-contempt, in a fierce burst of rage against the heart she could not control, Constance Wardour, heiress and queen absolute, was forced to confess to that heart that Clifford Heath's happiness was her happiness too.

Having been forced to recognize this fact, against her wish and will, Constance came to a better understanding with herself, and she confessed to herself, with cheeks aflame at the recollection, that her petulant outbreak, and shameful accusation against Doctor Heath, was but the mutinous struggle of the head against the heart's acknowledged master. Too late came this self confession. Sybil Lamotte's letter had never been found; the mystery surrounding its disappearance, remained a mystery; and, how could she recall her accusation, while the circumstances under which it was made remained unchanged? Realizing that she owed him reparation, she was yet powerless to make it.

It would be equivalent to a confession, that I could not be happy without his friendship," she said, hotly. "And he would not accept an apology while his innocence remained unproven. Let me suffer the consequences of my own folly; I deserve it; but," setting her white teeth resolutely, "no harm shall come to him that I can avert; and, I am not the weakest of women."

Oh, the perversity of women. Who can comprehend it? Who analyze the mysterious creatures?

When there was against Clifford Heath only a breath of suspicion, a few whispered words from his own lips, that might mean nothing of importance, when calmly reconsidered; a missing letter, with the contents of which he was familiar, and which, therefore, could be of little value to him, and it was enough. He stood before her accused, and went out from her presence wronged, insulted, splendid as King Arthur in his helpless indignation.

Now the detective's strong chain of evidence, John Burrill's strange insinuations, and still stranger conduct, his words when he spoke, his reticence when he kept silent, all were arrayed against him, with telling effect, and in spite of them all, Constance Wardour angrily assured herself, and fully believed, that Clifford Heath was a wronged, and innocent man. She did not reason herself into this belief; and it was absurd, of course. She arrived at her conclusions, as all loving women do, through her feelings, and her instinct. A woman seldom reasons, but in many cases her ready intuition is worth more than all man's wisdom. Her delicate instinct strikes directly at the truth, when man's reason gropes in the darkness.

Constance went out very little during these troubled days, and for this there were several reasons. John Burrill's obtrusiveness was at its height, and he fairly haunted the vicinity of Wardour; and since the advent of Mr. Belknap, Constance had an uneasy feeling that she was in some way, under surveillance. Nelly, who was argus-eyed, and always in armor on behalf of her mistress, had, on one or two occasions, spied a lurker about the premises; and Constance was resolved to give Mr. Belknap as little trouble, on her account, as possible. She had not visited Sybil for some days, for, although she had informed the detective that she desired to consult Mr. Lamotte, she had no such intentions; and, since the day when she had promised Mr. Lamotte to retain the detective for another week, she had avoided meeting him, and being forced to resume the conversation.

To know herself under the watchful eye of one detective, while anxiously expecting the advent of another, and to be

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aware that the presence of the one must not be made known to the other, afforded her a new and strange sensation; not altogether an unpleasant one either, for Constance was no coward, and had a decided taste for adventure.

She realized, too, the absurdity of being thus shadowed, in her own house, by her own hired agent.

"I should go down to posterity as the first woman who ever hired a spy to watch herself," she mused with a little laugh. "I begin to think that I am an absurd creature, throughout."

Two days passed, and Constance endured them, although the hours crept slowly. On the third, her anxiety was almost beyond control.

If Bathurst should fall her! If her letter had not found him! If he were absent from the city! Oh, what a chance was here for disaster. Mr. Belknap would soon be in the field, and Ray's time had almost expired.

"Oh," she said, anxiously, "if he disappoints me, what shall I do. I must trust Ray, and will be strong enough to battle with this danger?"

While she mused thus, growing wild with anxiety, a half-grown boy, bearing on his head a small tray of delicate ivory carvings, was applying for admittance at the servants' entrance. He was shabbily dressed, but possessed a fine, intelligent face, and bore himself with cool confidence.

"I have brought the carving for Miss Wardour," he said, briskly. "Can I see her, please?"

Nelly hesitated.

"She expects me," said the boy, quickly; "and, as I am a little late, I would like to show her the wares and be off, for I've come to sell in the village. Just tell her it's the chap she's looking for."

Constance stared in surprise when Nelly delivered this message.

"The chap I am looking for," she repeated slowly; then, with a sudden brightening of her whole face, she added: "Oh, to be sure! I had almost forgotten. Send him here, at once, Nelly."

"I hope you will excuse me," began the boy, apologetically; then, as Nelly closed the door, he dropped his voice, and said, "I come from Mr. Bathurst;" and, taking off his cap, he produced from thence a letter, which he put in her hand.

"I'm to wait for the answer," he said, and took up his position beside his wares.

Constance opened the letter, with a hand trembling with eagerness. It ran:—

(To be Continued.)

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