

# 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)

"Raymond Vandeyck, etc.  
"My friend—By coming to me, as on a receipt of this note, you will do me a great favor, and perhaps do one who is your friend an essential service. Come at once, to Yours in waiting,  
"CONSTANCE WARDOUR."

"There," said Ray, refolding the note; "now what say you?"

"That Miss Wardour's commands are to be obeyed; and—as your horse is stabled, and mine is at the door, you had best take mine and lose no time. Perhaps you may be dismissed as speedily as you are summoned, and we may take our drive after all. Go, go, my son," and he waved his hand theatrically.

"Thank you, Heath. You are a generous fellow; but don't look for your red roan steed until you see it back. I shall place that and myself at Miss Wardour's disposal. She shall find that she has summoned no laggard knight."

"Who talks of playing the knight to Miss Constance Wardour's fair lady? Let him have a care!" cried a gay voice from the doorway. And turning their eyes thither, they saw the dark, handsome face of Frank Lamotte.

A shade of annoyance crossed the face of young Vandeyck, but he retorted in the same strain—

"I am that happy man. Stand aside, sir. I go to cast myself and all my fortune at her feet." Then, turning a wicked look back at his friend in the big chair, he cried, "Heath, adieu! look your last on the red roan steed. I may be going 'O'er the hills and far away'—who knows?"

"You may be gone—  
"Deep into the dying day."  
"That's the thought that distresses me," retorted the doctor. "But go, go, egotist!"

With a laugh, and another backward meaning glance at the doctor, young Vandeyck pocketed his note, took up his hat, and murmuring a mocking adieu in the ear of young Lamotte, ran lightly down the steps, and, a moment later, the swift fall of hoofs told them he was off.

"What the deuce all the fellow?" said Lamotte, sourly, tossing his hat and himself down upon the office divan. "Prating like a school-boy about a summons from Miss Wardour."

"He means to get to Wardour Place without loss of time, if one may judge from the manner of his going. You know," smiling behind his hand, "Ray is a prime favorite at Wardour."

"I did not know it," returned Lamotte, sulkily. "Vandeyck don't seem to realize that I have a prior claim, and that his twaddle, therefore, only serves to render him ridiculous."

Clifford Heath dropped his hand from before his face, and turned two stern, searching eyes upon the young man.

"Have you a prior claim?" he asked, slowly.

"For a second the eyes of Frank Lamotte were hidden by their long lashes; then they were turned full upon the face of his interlocutor, as their owner replied firmly—  
"I have."

Raymond Vandeyck lost no time on his drive to Wardour Place; and before he could frame any sort of reasonable guess as to the possible meaning of Constance's note, he found himself in her very presence.

"Ah, Ray!" she exclaimed, extending a welcome hand, "you are promptness itself. I hardly dared hope to see you so soon."

"I met your messenger on the road, as I was riding in to keep an appointment with Heath," exclaimed Ray, "but as I was in company with Bradley, our new neighbor, you know, I did not open the note until I got to Heath's office. Then, as your note was urgent, and Heath's horse at the door, I took it, and here I am, very much at your service, Conny."

"And I don't know of another who could be of service to me just now, Ray," she said, seriously; "neither do I know just how to make use of you, Ray," suddenly, "are you burdened with a large amount of curiosity?"

"About the average amount, I think."  
"Well! I am about to give that curiosity a severe test."

"Seriously, Conny, unless your secret concerns some one especially dear to me, I can survive being kept in the dark."  
"And being made to work in the dark?"

"Yes, that too, under your orders, for I know I should risk nothing in obeying them."  
"I should set you no dangerous or dishonorable task, of course, Ray."  
"I am sure of that, Conny; command me; don't hesitate."

But she did hesitate, not knowing just how to tell him that she was Doctor Heath's friend, in spite of appearances, without telling, or revealing otherwise too much. How could she set the matter before him, as she wished him to see it?

Seeing her hesitate, Ray unwittingly came to the rescue, and Constance seized upon the idea he gave her, with hasty eagerness, little thinking of the results that were to follow her implied deceit.

"I can't feel too grateful for your confidence at any price," he said, laughing; "when I think how Lamotte glowered at me when he saw me coming here. But, then, if rumor speaks the truth, he has a right to be jealous, eh, Constance?"

Here was a way out of her dilemma:

let Ray imagine her engaged to FRANK Lamotte, and he would not misconstrue her interest in Doctor Heath; as for Frank, he had been a suitor, and a most troublesome one, for so long that she thought nothing of appropriating him to herself, as a matter of convenience, and only for the moment, and she never thought at all of the injury she might do herself by this deception.

"Oh, yes!" she replied; "I have given Frank the right to be as jealous as he pleases." And the hot blood flamed into her cheek, as she saw how readily he had taken her words as she had meant them to be understood.

"Lamotte's a lucky fellow," said Ray, "although I know a better man I would like to see in his shoes. But we won't quarrel over Frank. Is it him that I am to serve?"

"No," she replied, coloring again. And once more he misapplied her confusion.

Constance was silent and thoughtful for a few moments, and then she came directly to the point.

"Some strange things have come to my knowledge concerning Doctor Heath, Ray. They have come in such a manner that I would be in a measure violating the confidence of another were I to make a statement in full, and yet—in some way Doctor Heath must know that danger menaces him."

"Ah!" uttered Ray Vandeyck, and Constance, lifting her eyes to his face, caught a fleeting look that caused her to ask suddenly—

"Ray, have you heard anything about Doctor Heath? anything strange, I mean, or unexpected?"

"Why," replied Ray, slowly. "I have nothing very strange to relate, but—Heath's encounter with Burrill a short time since has made some talk."  
"I don't understand you."  
"Then is it not about this affair that you have sent for me?"

"Ray, explain yourself. What of this affair, as you call it?"

"Why, you see," began Ray, plunging into his recital after a fashion peculiar to himself, "about a week ago, yes, it was quite a week ago, on that stormy blustering Monday night, when sensible people staid indoors, Heath, after the manner of doctors, was straggling about that lovely precinct known as Mill avenue, trying to find the shortest way out after paying a visit to some sick child, or woman. I won't swear which; as I was saying, he was on his way out of that blessed avenue, when he heard screams coming from the cottage he was passing. It was the voice of a woman, and Heath made for the house, and rushed in just in time to see that latest addition to society, Mr. John Burrill, in a state of partial intoxication, raining blows about the head and shoulders of the woman who was once his wife. Heath rained one blow upon him and he went down under it. Then he got up, not quite satisfied and thirsting for more fight, and Heath felled him once more."

"It seems that the thing had been done so rapidly, that Burrill had not had time to get a fair look at the face of his assailant; but the second time he scrambled to his feet, Heath stood facing him full, braided and ready, when, behold, Burrill, after one look, turns as pale as a spectre, utters a yell of fear, and dashes out of the house like a madman. By this time several people had come in, and the thing puzzled them not a little. Heath asserted that he had never, to his knowledge, seen Burrill before; and yet there stood the fact of Burrill's fright at sight of him. Some believed it a case of mistaken identity; others, that Heath was trying to mislead them, and that he did know Burrill. The affair became noised about as such things will be, and some were curious to see another meeting between Heath and Burrill. And here comes the queer part of the business. In his sober moments, Burrill avoids Heath, and can not be brought to mention his name. But when he gets a little too much on board—beg pardon, Conny—I mean, somewhat intoxicated, he becomes very loquacious; then he throws out strange hints, and gives mysterious winks; states that he could tell a tale about Heath that would open everybody's eyes. He talks of 'borrowed plumage,' and insinuates that Heath would like to buy him off. He says that he took to his heels because he knew that Heath did not mean fair play, etc. Finally, two or three evenings ago, when Burrill was remarkably tipsy, and therefore, unusually ripe for a combat with any one, Heath and I, crossing the street opposite Spring's Bank, encountered him coming toward us, surrounded by a party of roughs. As we approached them, Burrill, making some uncouth gestures, came forward in advance of the rest, and as he came opposite Heath, leaned toward him and whispered a few words in his ear. I don't know what he said, but the effect on Heath was magical. For a moment he seemed staggered, as if by a blow, and then he took the fellow by the throat, and shook him until his teeth rattled; then loosed his hold so suddenly that his man dropped to the ground. Heath by this time was a little cooler; he stooped over the prostrate man, took him by the collar, and fairly lifted him to his feet, then he said:

"Understand this, fellow, I allow no man to interfere with my business. This is only a sample of what will happen to you if you ever try this dodge again; keep my name off your tongue in public and private, if you want whole bones in

your body; such an incident past the whole astonished crowd, minding them no more than if they were gnats. I followed, of course, and said, as I came up with Heath—  
"Quite an adventure, upon my word; you seem to possess a strange attraction for Burrill?"  
"Burrill," he exclaimed; 'who the mischief is the fellow, Ray?'  
"He is Mr. Lamotte's son-in-law," I answered.  
"Ah," he mused; 'so Jasper Lamotte has married his daughter to a black-miler; and after that, he said never a word more on the subject. I had it in my mind to tell him of the hints and insinuations Burrill in his unguarded moments was putting into circulation, but his reticence closed my lips.'  
He paused, and looked to his auditor for some comment, but she sat with her eyes fixed upon the carpet, and a troubled look on her face.  
"Don't think, Conny, that I am one of those who construe this against Heath," said the loyal fellow. "He is the best fellow in the world. The whole thing, for me, lies in a nutshell. Heath is not a man to disturb himself about his neighbor's concerns, and he don't expect his neighbors to interest themselves in his. This Burrill has picked up, somehow, a little information; something concerning Heath, or his past life, that is not known to—, and he is trying to make capital of it. The secret in itself may be a mere nothing, but Heath is the first man to resent impertinences, and the last man to make explanations. And he's right, too, especially under the present circumstances. I like him all the better for his pluck and his reticence; let him keep his secrets; so long as he gives me his friendship, I am quite content."  
Constance felt a thrill of satisfaction and a return of courage, as she listened. Here was a friend, loyal, enthusiastic, not to be alienated by slander or suspicion. She had known Ray from his childhood, and they had always been the best of friends, but she had never admired and honored him, never valued his friendship so much, as she did at this moment. His enthusiasm was contagious; she forgot all her fears of a personal nature and became in an instant the true woman and unselfish friend.  
"Ah, Ray," she exclaimed, lifting two admiring gray eyes to meet his, "you are a friend indeed! a friend to be proud of; but tell me, did you hear nothing more of Burrill after that second encounter?"  
(To be Continued.)

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"Running through the farmer's land, in some low ground down toward the village, there was a brook, with a boggy meadow on either side of it. Beyond the brook the ground rose again, so that the village was on higher ground, and the farmer's house and barns were on higher ground on his side.  
"Standing by the house that afternoon, and happening to look down over the wet meadows, the farmer saw something struggling over the bogs, sometimes on top of one, sometimes falling down between, but keeping coming all the time. It was the little pig that he had sold in the morning. It had got out of the pen in which it had been placed in the village, and had somehow got started in the right direction and got clear of the village, had come down the slope on the other side of the brook and had crossed the brook and floundered through the bogs and was now making straight for home. It was wet through and covered with mud, but it got there all right.  
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