

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.

"Umph!" retorted Craig, with a respectful sniff, "I rather thought you intended to sit down in that chair."

Turning his back upon the flippant young man, so sadly lacking in respect for the "powers that be," Corliss pursues his investigations. He has read, in many novels and sensational newspapers, vivid descriptions of similar examinations, without; he darts out, and dives in; he peers under every thing, over every thing, into every thing; he inspects, over and over again, the mutilated writing case, or safe, from which the treasure was actually taken; and raps and sounds it as if in search of some private receptacle that the thieves had overlooked, or Miss Wardour never found out. He goes down flat upon his stomach, and scrutinizes Miss Wardour's scrupulously clean carpets, in search of a footprint in the dust that is not there.

While he performs these feats, the mayor follows him about solemnly, and full of wondering admiration; and the man of the Argus scribbles, and chuckles and grins maliciously.

Meantime, there have been other arrivals at Wardour Place; and Constance, leaving the inspectors to their own devices, is standing in her drawing-room, talking earnestly with a broad-shouldered, handsome man, who looks much surprised at the tale she is telling.

"How unfortunate, and how fortunate," he says, depositing his hat upon the table beside him. "I came here to speak of our river excursion, and lo, I am in the midst of a sensation."

Constance laughed.

"And surrounded by forlorn females," she supplemented. "Aunt Honor won't recover from the fright in a week, although she looks so fierce at present."

Mrs. Alston, who is seated at the farthest window, half buried by the lace draperies, and looking steadfastly down the road, pops out her head to retort:—

"It's time to look fierce; don't I know that those Vandals in the next room will make as big a muddle as if they were in sympathy with the burglars?"

Constance laughed easily.

"They can't do much harm, auntie; the burglars did not leave a trace; I am positive of that." Then turning to the new comer, "I am very glad you came just now, Doctor Heath; you may help me with your advice. I have sent for my lawyer, Mr. O'Meara; but, for some reason he does not come."

"Mr. O'Meara left for the city last night."

"Oh! I am sorry for that; he would be sure to know how to proceed, and who to employ. Doctor Heath you are of course acquainted in the city; tell me of a good man, a really good one. I intend to spare no expense in hunting these robbers."

"And these diamonds," from behind the curtain.

"Aunt Honor, you are like the ghost in the pantomime; come out and be one of us."

"I won't."

"Very well, then; but seriously, Doctor Heath, if I can't secure but the one, let it be the robbers. Do you know I have a fancy that if we caught them or him, it would put an end to some of our mysteries. You have not been among us

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Neuralgia

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very long; but, don't you think we have more than our average of crime?"

"I had not observed, Miss Wardour."

"Less than a year ago, Brant, the jeweler, was a heavy loser. Within the year, three banks in this vicinity have been robbed. Last summer, Mark Olson, a farmer, drew from the bank several thousand dollars, intending to purchase land. Half way between W— and his home he was waylaid, knocked from his horse, robbed, and left in the road senseless. I could name to you no less than seven private residences that have been burglarized within the past ten months, and if I related to you the circumstances attending each robbery, you would be satisfied, as I am, that, in every case, the robbers knew their ground, and did not work at random."

"And you have noted each of these events so accurately, Miss Wardour, and yet, were not—warned?"

"I have noted all these events, Doctor Heath, and yet—have been robbed."

Doctor Heath bends his eyes upon the floor, and remains silent; there is no possibility of reading his thoughts in his face. It is a fine face, however, and Miss Wardour must be pardoned if she takes advantage of this temporary abstraction, to gaze full at him for one moment. The close cropped thick brown hair, displays a well shaped head, the forehead is broad and full, the eyes large, dark gray, and capable of almost any expression; usually they look out from his handsome face with a half-contemptuous indifference to all things, that leads one to fancy those eyes may have a history; this may or may not be the case. Doctor Heath came to W— less than a year ago, armed with a personal certificate of merit from the first of the great New York physicians, bought out the practice of a broken down old resident doctor, fitted up a handsome office and settled down to his business. He hired a small cottage as a place of residence, installed a deaf old woman as housekeeper and maid of all work, and lived a quiet bachelor life, riding a good horse, smoking a good cigar, and growing in favor with polite W— society.

And this is absolutely all that W— can tell concerning Dr. Clifford Heath. What was his past, whence he came, what the length of his purse or pedigree, no one knows. People have tried to find out something—of course—but Doctor Heath has a wonderful way of setting aside the hints of the curious, and he ignores the right of W— to know his private history, with a cool impertinence that is as exasperating as it is effectual.

As he thinks, Miss Wardour watches; but no change comes over the calm, smooth shaven face, every feature expresses firmness and strength, and nothing more.

"And so you want an able officer to take this business in hand, Miss Wardour," says Clifford Heath, at length. "If it is as you suspect, it will need a shrewd man, and you have no clue, save those that are now being inspected," with a light laugh, "by our worthy constable and his supporters."

Constance Wardour arose and came close to the table, speaking in a low voice.

"Yes, Doctor Heath, I will trust you, although I intended saying nothing of this until an officer arrived. I have a clue, slight, although it may be, it is—"

She drew from her pocket a small white roll, and unfolding it, held up for his inspection half of a fine cambric handkerchief, and a tiny stoppered vial of finest cut glass.

Doctor Heath glanced at the vial and uttered one word.

"Chloroform,"

"Chloroform," repeated Miss Wardour; "when I was awakened by the knocking at my door, I found this," shaking the fragment of cambric, "lying lightly across my face; and the vial, on the little night stand beside my bed. Aunt Honor was rapping for admittance, and when she had made me comprehend the situation, we decided that it was best to say nothing of this. What seems most strange to us, that it was administered with so much care; I am affected by the smallest quantity of the drug, and an ordinary dose would have put me under medical treatment. I could not have left my bed for a week, had they given me as much as would serve only to stupefy Aunt Honor there."

"No," interrupted Mrs. Alston, once more half emerging from her window. "It would have been worse than that; I think an overdose of chloroform would kill Constance. It seems as if they knew just how much to give."

Was it fancy, or did a troubled look rest for a moment in the eyes of Doctor Heath, and on his countenance a shade of pallor?

"This is, to my mind, the most serious aspect of the affair," he said gravely. "Mrs. Alston is right; an overdose of that drug would be fatal to you. Your life has been jeopardized. I agree with Mrs. Alston, your investigation is in the hands of bunglers; let us hunt these fellows down."

"I will see that an officer is telegraphed for at once; but—shall I send to the regular bureau, or—how?"

"There is one man in the city, if he is in the city now, who is qualified for the position he holds. He has withdrawn himself from the regular force, and acts solely on his own responsibility. He is much sought after, and possesses wonderful abilities; some of his exploits have been truly astounding."

"And this man is?"

"Mr. Lamotte; Mr. Francis Lamotte," announced a servant.

"Show them in," said Constance, at

the same time gathering up the piece of cambric and the little vial and patting them in her pocket.

Doctor Heath arose, and taking up his hat, murmured an apology.

"I have a patient at this hour, Miss Wardour, and will call again during the day. You will not stand in need of my counsel now," smilingly. "Mr. Lamotte can give you all needful advice, and he is sure to be right," and Dr. Heath bowed himself out.

"The Wardour diamonds," he muttered, as he mounted his horse. "And to think that they almost cost her her life; a skilled hand was it? Well, when the detective comes, I too, may have a clue for him."

CHAPTER III.

Mr. Jasper Lamotte is a tall man, a dark man, and a stately man. He is grave of speech, yet very suave and pleasing. He is open handed and charitable, and a very popular man among the people of W—. He will rein in his blooded horses to ask after the health of his factory hands, and doff his hat to the wife of his humblest tenant. He has been for many years a resident of W—. Years ago he was a great traveler, coming and going almost incessantly, but, after a time, he built the largest and newest of the W— mills, and settled himself down to rear his family, and attend in person to his "bales and shekels."

Francis Lamotte is, what his father has been, a tall, dark eyed, sallow skinned young man, with a Greek profile, a profusion of curling dusky hair, a soft slow voice, a sweet and most pleasing smile; aristocratic hands and feet, a most affable manner; a very agreeable companion, and a dutiful son and brother. So saith W—. Such is Francis Lamotte, and being such, he is voted, with one consent, the handsomest young man in W—. Francis Lamotte, too, is popular with the people of W—; handsome and fascinating, the son of a father whose fortune is said to be enormous; he is welcomed in every household circle, and he brings pleasure and courtesy wherever he enters.

"Constance, my child, what is this that I hear?" exclaims Jasper Lamotte, taking the hand of Miss Wardour as she advances to meet him. "Have they not exaggerated the truth? The village is full of rumors."

"Constance, good morning," breaks in Francis Lamotte.

"Father's head is a little turned by all this. Have you had a burglar? Have they stolen the Wardour diamonds? And are you frightened to death? And," with a malicious glance toward Mrs. Alston, who had forsaken her window and was rolling slowly towards them, serene, and dignified, "did they bind and gag dear Mrs. A—?" "Yes, yes! and no, no!" says Constance, cutting off the retort that was rising to the lips of her aunt. "Be seated, Mr. Lamotte; sit down Frank. I have had a burglar; they did steal my diamonds. But—well, they did not frighten me for I was not aware of their presence, and they did not bind Aunt Honor for they—"

"Hadn't rope enough," interrupts that lady, at which they all laugh.

"But seriously, Constance," resumes Lamotte pere, "this is a bad business; a very bad business; good gracious! are we all to be robbed at the pleasure of these rascals? Plundered whenever their pockets run dry? It's abominable! What has been done? There should be an officer on the spot now."

"So there is," breaks in Aunt Honor, with suspicious sweetness. "Constable Corliss and Mayor Soames are examining the library and dressing room."

Mr. Lamotte retains his gravity, but after exchanging demure glances, and in spite of themselves, Constance and Francis Lamotte laugh outright.

"Then, my friends, let us await a revelation," Francis draws in the most approved 'camp meeting' fashion.

"Poor Corliss!" Mr. Lamotte smiles slightly; "at any rate he will try to do his duty. But, Constance, you should have an officer here as soon as possible; I should not have come here venturing my suggestions but I learned, accidentally, that your lawyer, O'Meara, is absent; that is another misfortune. O'Meara has a long clear head; would not make a bad detective himself. As he is away, and you need some one to act for you, why, I place myself at your disposal; if you have not already appointed an agent," with another smile.

"I have made no move in the matter, Mr. Lamotte; indeed, I have hardly had time to think, as yet. I suppose, too, that we have lost valuable time, and yet we can't get a detective down here in a moment. Pray take what measure you deem best, and let us have the best officer that we can get. I am especially anxious to capture the thieves if possible—and the diamonds—of course."

"England expects every man to do his duty," quoted Francis. "Constance give me an appointment, too."

"So I will," retorted Constance, wickedly. "I think you are eminently fitted to assist—Mr. Corliss."

"Frank, be serious," says Mr. Lamotte, with a touch of severity. "Now Constance, let us do what we can to make up for this unavoidable loss of time; first tell me, as minutely as you can, just how this robbery was discovered."

(To be Continued.)

NOTICE.

NOTICE is hereby given that the Annual General Meeting of the shareholders of the Charlottetown Gas Light Company will take place at the Gas Works, on Tuesday, the 11th day of May, 1897, at the hour of eleven o'clock in the forenoon, for the purpose of electing directors and the general transaction of business.

LEMUEL MCKAY,

Secretary.

A NEIGHBOR'S ADVICE

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"Father's head is a little turned by all this. Have you had a burglar? Have they stolen the Wardour diamonds? And are you frightened to death? And," with a malicious glance toward Mrs. Alston, who had forsaken her window and was rolling slowly towards them, serene, and dignified, "did they bind and gag dear Mrs. A—?" "Yes, yes! and no, no!" says Constance, cutting off the retort that was rising to the lips of her aunt. "Be seated, Mr. Lamotte; sit down Frank. I have had a burglar; they did steal my diamonds. But—well, they did not frighten me for I was not aware of their presence, and they did not bind Aunt Honor for they—"

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