

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)

Mr. Wedron leans forward, fastens his eyes upon her face, and says gravely: "Miss Wardour, all that can be done for Clifford Heath will be done. But—the case as it stands is against him. For some reason he has lost courage. For some reason he is sacrificing himself. I believe that he knows who is the guilty one, and that he is sacrificing himself. Furthermore, I believe that there are those who can tell, if they will, far more than has been told concerning this case; those who may withhold just the evidence that in a lawyer's hands will clear Clifford Heath."

The pallid misery of her face is pitiful, but it does not move Mr. Wedron. "Last night," he goes on mercilessly, "Mr. Raymond Vandeyk sat where you sit now, and I said to him what I now say to you. Miss Wardour, Raymond Vandeyk knows more than he has told. His keen eyes search her face, her own orbs fall before his gaze. Then she lifts them sudden, and asks abruptly:— "Who are the other parties who are withholding their testimony?" Again Mr. Wedron suppresses a smile. "Another who knows more than she chooses to tell is Mr. Frank Lamotte."

She starts perceptibly. "And—are there others?" "Another, Miss Wardour, is—yourself." "Myself?" "She bows her face upon her hands, and convulsive shudders shake her form. She sits thus so long that O'Meara becomes restless, but Mr. Wedron sits calm, serene, expectant. By and by she lifts her head, and her eyes shine with the glint of blue steel. "You are right, sir," she says in a low, steady voice. "I can tell more than is known. It may not benefit Doctor Heath; I do not see how it can. Nevertheless, all that I can tell you shall hear, and I only ask that you will respect such portions of my story as are not needed in evidence. As for Mr. O'Meara, I know I can trust him. And I believe, sir, that I can rely upon you."

Mr. Wedron bows gravely. "I will begin by saying that Mr. Vandeyk, if he has withheld anything concerning Doctor Heath, has acted honorably in so doing. He was bound by a promise, from which I shall at once release him. In obedience to a sign from Mr. Wedron, O'Meara prepares to write. "You have said, sir," addressing Mr. Wedron, "that I may be able to say something which, if withheld, would complicate this case. What do you wish to hear?"

"Every thing, Miss Wardour, every thing. All that you can tell concerning your acquaintance with Clifford Heath—all that you have seen and know concerning John Burrill; all that you can recall of the sayings and doings of the Lamottes. And remember, the things that may seem unimportant or irrelevant to you, may be the very items that we lack to complete what may be a chain of strong evidence in favor of the accused. Allow me to question you from time to time, and, if I seem possessed of too much information concerning your private affairs, do not be too greatly astonished, but rest assured that all my researches have been made to serve another, not to gratify myself."

"Where shall I begin, sir?" "Begin where the first shadow of complication fell; begin at the first word or deed of Doctor Heath's that struck you as being in any way strange or peculiar." She flushes hotly and begins her story. She describes her first impression of Doctor Heath, touching lightly upon their acquaintance previous to the time of the robbery at Wardour. Then she describes, very minutely, the first call made by Doctor Heath, after that affair. "One moment, Miss Wardour, you told Doctor Heath all that you knew concerning the robbery."

"I did, sir," coloring rosily. "And you exhibited to him the vial of chloroform and the piece of cambrie?" "I did."

"At this point you were interrupted by callers, and Doctor Heath left rather abruptly?" "Precisely, sir."

"Who were these callers?" "Mr. Lamotte and his son."

"Had you any reason for thinking that Doctor Heath purposely avoided a meeting with these gentlemen?" "Not at that time," flushing slightly. "Go on, Miss Wardour."

She resumes her story, telling all that she can remember of the call, of Frank's return, and of Sybil's letter. "About this letter, I would rather not speak, Mr. Wedron; it can not affect the case."

"It does affect the case," he replies quickly. "Pray omit no details just here."

She resumes, telling the story of that long day, of Clifford Heath's second visit, and of the news of Sybil Lamotte's flight. She tells how, at sunset, she opened the strange letter, and how, bewildered and startled out of herself, she put it into Clifford Heath's hands, and called upon him to advise her. "Almost word for word she repeats his comments, and then she hesitates. "Go on," says Mr. Wedron, impatiently; "what happened next?"

He does not interrupt her, nor display much interest, until she reaches the point in her narrative when she discovers the loss of Sybil's letter.

"Well!" he cries, as she hesitates once more. "Go on! go on! about that letter." "Gentlemen," says Constance, contritely, "here, if I could, I would spare myself. When Doctor Heath came, to return the bottle borrowed by the detective, I accused him of taking the letter."

"What!" starting violently; "you suspected him?" "I insulted him."

"And he—?" "He resented the insult in the only way possible to a gentleman. He accepted it in silence, and turned his back upon me."

"Ah! and since that time?" "Since that time I have received no intimation that Doctor Heath is aware of my existence."

"Ah-h-h!" ejaculates Mr. Wedron; "and you have not found the letter?" "No. Its fate remains a mystery."

"Do you still believe that Doctor Heath could account for its disappearance, if he would?" "On sober second thought, I could see no motive for taking the letter. I was hasty in my accusation. I came to that decision long ago."

"You were deeply grieved over the disappearance of Miss Lamotte?" "She was my dearest friend."

"Was?" inquiringly. "Constance pales slightly, but does not correct herself. "Miss Lamotte's strange marriage has been since explained, I believe?"

"No, sir! not to my satisfaction." "What! Was it not to save a scapegrace brother?"

"Stop, sir! That scapegrace brother is the one of all that family most worthy your respect and mine. You wish me to tell you of the family; let me begin with Evan."

Beginning where she had dropped her story, Constance goes on. She outlines the visits of the two detectives; she tells how Frank Lamotte received the news of his sister's flight.

Then she paints in glowing, enthusiastic language, the interview with Evan in the garden. She pictures his grief, his rage, his plea that she will stand fast as his sister's friend and champion. She repeats his odd language; describes his sudden change of manner; his declaration that he will find a reason for Sybil's conduct, that shall shield Sybil, and be acceptable to all.

Then she tells how the rumor that Sybil had sacrificed herself for Evan's sake grew and spread, and how the boy had sanctioned the report. How he had come to her the second time to claim her promise, and announce the time for its fulfillment.

"To-day," she says, with moist eyes, "Evan Lamotte lies on a drunkard's bed; liquor has been his curse. Morally he is weaker than water; but he has under all that weakness, the elements that go to make a hero. All that he had, he sacrificed for his sister. Degraded by drink as he was, he could still feel his superiority to the man Burrill; yet, for Sybil's sake, to relieve her of his brutal presence, Evan became his companion, and passed long hours in the society that he loathed."

"Ah!" ejaculates Mr. Wedron; "ah-h-h!" then he closes his lips, and Constance resumes. She tells next how she became weary of the search for the Wardour diamonds; how she sought to withdraw private detective Belknap; and how that individual had endeavored to implicate Doctor Heath, and had finally accused him; how she had temporized, and sent for officer Bathurst; and how, during the three days of waiting, she had seen Ray Vandeyk to watch over Clifford Heath. She finishes her story without interruption, carrying it up to the very day of the murder. Then she pauses, dreading further questioning.

But Mr. Wedron asks no questions, and makes no comment. He fidgets in his chair, and seems anxious to end the interview.

"Thank you, Miss Wardour," he says, rising briskly; "you have been an invaluable witness; and I feel like telling you, that—thanks to you, I hope soon to put my hand upon the guilty party, and open the prison doors for Heath."

She utters a low cry. "My God! What have I said!" she cries wildly. "Listen, sir: Clifford Heath must, and shall, be free; but—you must never drag to justice the true culprit; you never shall!"

She is on her feet facing Mr. Wedron a look of startled defiance in her eyes. He is gazing at her with the look of a man who has discovered a secret. Suddenly he comes close beside her, and says, in low, significant tones— "Let us understand each other; one of two must suffer for this crime. Shall it be Clifford Heath, the innocent, or—Frank Lamotte?"

She reels and clutches wildly at a chair for support. "Frank Lamotte!" she gasps, "Frank, Oh! No! No! It must not be him! Oh! You do not understand; you can not."

She pauses, affrighted and gasping. Then her lips close suddenly, and she struggles fiercely to regain her composure. After a little she turns to Mr. O'Meara, saying— "You have heard me say that Mr. Bathurst the detective, and friend of

Doctor Heath, was, not long since, in W—; he may be here still; I do not know. But he must be found; he is the only man who can do what must be done. For I repeat, Doctor Heath must be saved, and the true criminal must not be punished. My entire fortune is at your command; find this detective, for my hands are tied; and he must, he must, find a way to save both guilty and innocent."

"This is getting too deep for me, Wedron," says O'Meara, when the door has closed behind Constance. "What does it lead up to? For I take it your tactics mean something."

Mr. Wedron laughs, a low, mellow laugh. "Things are shaping themselves to my liking," he says, rubbing his hands briskly. "We are almost done floundering, O'Meara. Thanks to Miss Wardour, I know where to put my hand when the right time comes."

"I don't understand."

"You will very soon. Now hear a prophecy: Before to-morrow night, Clifford Heath will send for you, and lay before you a plan for his defence. He will manifest a sudden desire to live."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

It is that night a man is walking slowly up and down the little footpath that leads from the highway, just opposite Mapleton, down to the river and close past that pretty, white boat house belonging to the Lamotte domain.

He is very patient, very tranquil in his movements, and quite unconscious that, crouched in the shadow, not far away, a small figure notes his every action.

Presently a second form emerges from the gloom that hangs over the gates of Mapleton, and comes down toward the river. Just beside the boat house it pauses and waits the man's approach.

The new comer is a woman. The night is not so dark but that her form is distinctly visible to the hidden watcher. "Well," says the man, coming close beside her, "I am here—madam."

"Yes," whispers the woman. "Have you—?" she hesitates. "Accomplished my task?" he finishes the sentence. "Have you not proof up yonder that the work is done?"

The woman trembles from head to foot, and draws farther away. "I am only waiting to receive what is now due me," the man resumes. "You need have no fears as to the future; like Abraham, you have been provided with a lamb for the sacrifice."

Again a shudder shakes the form of the woman, but she does not speak. "I must trouble you to do me a favor, Mrs. Burrill," the man goes on. "It is necessary that I should see the honorable Mr. Lamotte. So, if you will be so good as to admit me to Mapleton to-night, under cover of this darkness, and contrive an interview without disturbing the other inmates, you will greatly oblige me; but first my two thousand dollars, if you please."

With a sudden movement the woman flings back the cloak that has been drawn close about her face, and strikes with her hand upon the timbers of the boat house. There is a cracking sound, a flash of light, and then the slow blaze of a parlor match.

By its light they gaze upon each other, and then the man mutters a curse. "Miss Wardour!"

"Mr. Belknap, it is I."

There is a moment's silence, and then she speaks again:— "You are disappointed, Mr. Belknap; you expected to meet another who would pay you your price for—you know what. You will not see that other one; she is hovering between life and death, and her delirious ravings have revealed you in your true character. You may wonder how I have dared thus to brave an assassin, a blackmailer. I am not reckless. If I do not return in ten minutes, safe and sound, the boat house will be speedily searched and you, Mr. Belknap, will be hunted as you may have hunted others. Not long since you made terms with me, you attempted coercion, I might say blackmail; to-night, it is in my power to bridge your tongue, and I tell you that, unless you leave W— at once you will find yourself a resident here against your will. Consider your business in W— at an end. This is not a safe place for you."

With the last words on her lips, she turns and speeds swiftly back toward Mapleton, and Jerry Belknap, private detective, stands transfixed, gazing at the spot from which she has fled, and muttering curses not good to hear.

He makes no attempt to follow her. He recognizes the fact that he is baffled, and, for the time at least, defeated. Grinding out curses as he goes, he turns his steps toward W—.

Then, from out the shadows of the boat house, a small bundle uncloths itself, stands erect, and then moves forward as if in pursuit.

But, something else rises up from the ground, directly in the path of this small shadow; a long, slender body displays itself, and a voice whispers, close to the ears of the smaller watcher:— "Remain here, George, and keep a close eye on the house. I will look after him."

Then the shadows separate; the taller one follows in the wake of the disconsolate detective.

The other, scaling the park palling like a cat, vanishes in the darkness that surrounds Mapleton.

The reflections of Jerry Belknap, private detective, as he goes, with moody brow, and tightly compressed lips, across the pretty river bridge, and back toward his hotel, are far from pleasant.

He is a shrewd man, and has engineered many a knotty case to a successful issue, thereby covering himself with glory.

This was in the past, however; in the days when he had been regularly attached to a strong and reliable detective agency. For tact, energy, ambition, he had no peer; but one day his career had been nipped in the bud. A young man, equally talented, and far more honorable, had caused his overthrow; and yet had saved him from the worst that might have befallen him. And Jerry Belknap, had stepped down from an honorable position and deter-

mined to make his power, experience, and acknowledged abilities, serve him as the means of supplying his somewhat extravagant needs, had resolved himself into a "private detective," and betaken himself to "ways that are dark."

"There's something at the bottom of this business that I don't understand," mused he as he paced onward; little thinking how soon he is to be enlightened on this and sundry other subjects. "I never felt more sanguine of bringing a crooked operation to a successful termination, and I never yet made such an abject failure. I shall make it my business to find out, and at once, what is this power behind the throne. So, according to Miss Wardour, may Satan fly away with her, I am not to approach the Lamotte's, I am to lose my reward, I am to retire from the field like a whipped cur. Miss Wardour, we shall see about that."

"Call me for the early train going west," he says to the night clerk, on reaching the hotel; "let me see, what is the hour?"

"The western train leaves very early, sir—at four twenty. Then you won't be here to witness Burrill's funeral? It will call everybody out. The circumstances attending the man's life and death will make it an event for W—."

"It's an event that won't interest me. If I have been rightly informed, the man is better placed in his coffin, than he ever was in his boots. I shall leave my baggage here—all but a small valise. I expect to return to W— soon. If anything occurs to change my plans, I will telegraph you and have it forwarded."

At this moment the door of the office opens and closes noisily, and a man comes rather unsteadily toward them. It is Smith, the book-peddler, and evidently much intoxicated.

"Hallo, Smith," says the night clerk, jocosely, as Mr. Belknap turns away, "you seem to have rheumatism, and I suspect you find more fun than business in W—."

"Town ain't much on literature," reports Mr. Smith, amiably, "but it's the devil and all for draw poker. I've raked in a pot, and I'm going on to the next plous town, so

"If you are waking, call me early." Old top, I'm going west."

(To be continued.)

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