

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.)

"His only daughter!" repeated the detective in a hushed sympathetic voice; "what a blow! what a bitter blow to a father's heart. Ah, madam," turning to Mrs. Alston, "these things are common, especially so to men in my profession, but we can never adjust ourselves to them for all that; each one comes to some one with the shock of a never before experienced horror. Death is common, the commonest thing of all but, it is the 'king of terrors' still."

His voice, low, splendidly modulated, sadly cadenced, seemed thrilling with sympathy, and he sighed as he lowered his eyes to the floor, and relapsed into meditation, seemingly forgetful of the business in hand.

Suddenly he started, seeming to recover himself with an effort.

"Pardon my abstraction," he said, a shade of pensiveness still lingering in his voice. "In contemplating another's sorrow, I am forgetting your business. I can only hope that this matter is not so bad as it might be, as such things sometimes are."

"It's as bad as it can be," responded Constance, gloomily. "It won't bear discussion; I mentioned it to you, Mr. Belknap, in order to show you how entirely absorbed Mr. Lamotte will of necessity be in his own affairs when he reaches home, and that we will be obliged to move in this matter without him."

"Perhaps there is some one else you may desire to consult in Mr. Lamotte's absence?" hazarded the private detective.

"No," replied Constance; "my lawyer is out of town, and there is no one else upon whom I can rely. You must act alone, Mr. Belknap."

"Authorized by you I shall not hesitate to do so," he replied, bowing courteously. "The case looks very clear to me. It will be a matter of time of course, these old birds are sly; but eventually they will try to market their wares, and then we shall have them. You can give me an accurate description of all the stolen jewels, Miss Wardour?"

"Oh, certainly."

"Then the sooner that is done the better."

At this moment a soft rap sounded on the door. Constance crossed the room and admitted Nelly, who said in a low tone:

"Mr. Francis Lamotte wishes to see you, Miss. I told him you were particularly engaged, just as you told me; but he said to tell you he had just come from his search, and would only detain you for a moment."

Constance paled slightly, and after a moment's thought, said:

"Wait a moment, Nelly." Then she went back and addressed the detective and her aunt.

"It is Francis Lamotte," she said, adding, by way of explanation to the detective, "the eldest son of Mr. Lamotte, and brother of the young lady who has brought trouble to herself and family. He, Francis, went on Saturday, on a self-imposed search through the surrounding country, in the hopes of finding some trace of these robbers. If he is but now returned he cannot yet have heard of his sister's flight. We cannot let him go away in ignorance, and yet," turning a look of swift appeal upon her aunt, "Aunt Honor, will you lay aside old prejudices and tell him of this sad misfortune?"

Mrs. Alston looked doubtful for a moment, then a look of satisfied consideration came into her face as she thought:

"She can't be very much infatuated with him or she would herself undertake this delicate task, and I can afford to pity the poor fellow, since she does not pity him overmuch," hence the strange mingling of pleasure and pity in her face as she said aloud:

"Certainly I will break the news to him, my dear, and as gently as is in my power."

Constance was turning to give her answer to Nelly when the voice of the detective interposed.

"Pardon me," he said, "you tell me this young man has been scouring the country in search of information. Would it not be well to hear what report he brings? To allow me to see him here in your presence, and then let Mrs. Alston tell him her story. I'll news you know," smiling slightly, "comes soon enough at latest."

"Your suggestion is good," replied Constance, whose face continued to look anxious and troubled. "We will receive him here, then, and after hearing his story, you and I can withdraw."

In the hurry and embarrassment of the moment, and the situation, Constance had entirely forgotten the proximity of the concealed detective, as also had Mrs. Alston; and that invisible gentleman began to scent the prospect of a long imprisonment.

Obedient to a nod from Constance, Nelly vanished, and soon re-appeared, ushering in Francis Lamotte, looking somewhat jaded and travel-worn, but quite confident and smiling.

In a few words Constance made him acquainted with the detective, and gave him an outline of the doings at Wardour, including Mr. Belknap's discoveries, since he was last there; and the subdued kindness of her manner, caused him to wonder not a little and rejoice greatly, within himself.

"And so you have been bringing things down to a fine point," said Francis, after the greetings were over, and he had

listened to Constance's explanation of the present state of affairs.

"It appears then that I come just in time; and perhaps you sir," bowing to Mr. Belknap, "may conclude that my amateur work has not been quite thrown away, or misapplied."

"Pray give me details," said the detective, consulting his watch, which was a huge silver affair, quite in keeping with the disguise he still wore. "I must economize my time, as much as may be, and shall be glad to hear all you have to tell—at once. Miss Wardour instructs me to act in this matter, according to my best judgment, and that tells me to shorten my stay here, and commence a search in the city."

"All I know is soon told," said young Lamotte, with a light laugh. "I rode a great many miles, and asked a great many useless questions. Yesterday, however, I learned that two men had boarded a freight train bound cityward, at day break, Sunday morning, at Blair, a little watering station, some fifteen miles from here. I could not get a very accurate description of them. They were below the medium size, I should judge, wearing loose-fitting dark gray garments, and soft hats, pulled well down over their faces. The man at the tank tells me, he noticed distinctly that one of them wore very large heavy boots, and that they were gauged here and there with red clay. Acting upon this hint, I rode some four miles southeast from Blair, knowing that there is a piece of marsh field, which the highway crosses, that has a reddish, clayey soil. Here, after asking a good many wrong persons, I found at last the right one, in the person of a farmer who, hearing some unusual noise among his cattle, arose before daybreak, and, going toward his barn, noticed two shadowy forms crossing the field just beyond. They were coming from the south, he said, and he watched them until they climbed the fence and struck into the road leading toward Blair. It was too dark for him to see them distinctly, but as they were then crossing a red loam field, we are safe to conclude that they were the two who a little later, took to the freight cars at the water station."

Mr. Belknap had been for some moments writing rapidly in a small memorandum book, and as Francis ceased speaking, Constance, after a moment's silence, said, more to relieve the stillness than with a desire for any further intelligence:

"And is that all, Frank?"

"That is enough," interposed the detective, before the young man could reply. "Mr. Lamotte, let me congratulate you; you have done well. This confirms my theory, and gives me something to start from when I reach the city. I shall go now with a light heart, and a more than moderate hope of success."

"Then your business here is about accomplished?" asked Francis.

"It is accomplished, thanks to you. I would like," glancing as he spoke, into his note book, "to talk this matter over with you further. It is possible I might see you again before leaving for the city. At present," he broke off abruptly, and glanced at Constance.

"I understand," laughed she nervously; "at present you require my assistance about that list of jewels, Frank, you will remain here with Aunt Honor for a short time; she has, I think, something to say to you. We will go to the library, Mr. Belknap," and she turned toward the door.

"Don't hurry matters so, please," expostulated Francis. "Let me say a little word to Mr. Belknap before you carry him off. His business here being so nearly done, the necessity for extra caution ceases, does it not? At least, it would not injure the cause if I carry him over to Mapleton to luncheon; will it, think you? You won't leave for the city before night, Mr. Belknap, I hope?"

"You are very good," said the detective, with some hesitation. "But, if you please, we will renew this subject a little later; now, just excuse me," and before the bewildered young man could raise his voice to intercept them, Constance and Mr. Belknap had passed from the room, and he found himself alone with Mrs. Alston. Turning toward that lady, he was surprised at the look of intent pity she was bending on him, and remembering the words of Constance, he came close beside her, saying:

"You had something to say to me, madam?"

"Yes, Frank," he almost started upon hearing his name falling so gently from her lips. She was not used to familiarity in addressing him. "Prepare yourself to receive a shock, a terrible shock." A look of uneasiness, but not of alarm, came over his countenance.

"What is it?" he asked hastily. "Has Evan—done something worse than usual?"

"Not to my knowledge. It is not Evan."

"Not Evan, what then; tell me Mrs. Alston," his face becoming paler and paler.

"Frank, your sister has eloped!"

He fell into the nearest chair, white and limp.

"Go on," he whispered hoarsely, lifting a haggard face toward her; "tell me—the worst, Mrs. Alston."

"She has eloped with John Burrill," went on Mrs. Alston, a shade of coldness in her voice. "They ran away on Saturday afternoon."

His head drooped forward and fell

upon the table before him. Thus for a moment he remained motionless, then his voice broke the stillness, sounding faint and hollow.

"Is that—all—you can tell me?"

"All! Yes!" exclaimed Mrs. Alston in a burst of nervousness. "I wish I had not told you so much. Frank don't take it so hard."

He lifted his head, showing her a ghastly face and pale trembling lips.

"Did Constance see Sybil? Does she know—" he broke off abruptly and half rising from his chair, stretched out to her an imploring hand.

"Mrs. Alston," he said hoarsely. "I must see Constance. I must. For God's sake send her to me, just for one moment."

"But—" began Mrs. Alston.

"I tell you I must see her," he cried, with sudden fierceness. "I shall go to her if there is no other way."

Great drops of sweat stood out on his forehead; once more he looked as he had two days before, when he stood alone under the trees of Wardour Place, after his parting with Constance.

Seeing that look upon his face, Mrs. Alston went slowly towards the door.

"I will send Constance to you," she said gently and went out, closing the door softly.

When he was alone he looked upon Francis Lamotte's face became fierce and set. Springing to his feet he paced the floor like a mad man.

"That letter," he hissed, "that accursed letter, what has it told? I must know! I must know the worst! blind fool that I was to let my own hand bring this about. Oh! this is horrible! Am I lost or—"

Suddenly he seemed to recollect himself and dropping into a chair he buried his passion-distorted face in his arms and so awaited the coming of Constance.

He had not long to wait; soon his listening ear caught the gentle opening and closing of the door, and then he felt a light hand upon his arm, and a sweet pitying voice said: "Poor Frank, poor boy, don't let this overcome you so."

One hand reached up and clasped the soft hand that rested on his arm, but he did not lift his head, as he said brokenly:

"Tell me the worst, Constance."

"Why, Frank! the worst is told."

"But," his hand tightened its clasp, "you know more than she has told me."

"No, Frank, nothing more."

He lifted his pale face again.

"Constance—that letter."

She started and flushed.

"What letter, Frank?"

"You know," his eyes scanning her face hungrily. "Her letter. The one I brought you two days ago. What was it?"

She drew away her hand.

"It was a note of farewell, Frank. Nothing more."

"Then she told you?" he gasped—caught his lips between his teeth, and waited for her to finish the sentence.

"She told me nothing, Frank. Oh, I wish she had."

He sprang up, overturning his chair in his hasty excitement.

"Nothing!" he cried, "she told you nothing?"

"Absolutely nothing. The letter was an enigma. How strangely you act, Frank. I can't understand you."

Slowly the life color returned to his cheeks and lips, as he answered, or stammered:

"Pardon me, Constance. I thought—I feared—I hoped there might be some explanation. I thought she must have given you some reason for so horrible a step. Are you sure there is no hint, no clue to help us?"

"Frank, listen: Sybil's note explained nothing."

It only implied me not to think harshly of her, when I should know what she had done, and bade me farewell. I could not comprehend its meaning until the news reached me that she had fled."

"And you can not guess why she did this thing?"

"No."

He turned away, putting his hand up before his face, and uttering a groan.

Then he moved toward one of the French windows, pushed it open, and leaned out.

"I feel as if I were going mad," he muttered. "Constance, pardon me; I must have the air. I must be alone to think, and to face this—this disgrace that has come upon us."

And he stepped through the open window, and reeled rather than walked

down the steps, and out among the trees. Constance watched him until the shrubbery hid him from view, and then, with a quick, nervous glance about the room, and out at the windows, she went to the door which shut out her tramp detective from view, but not from hearing.

"Come out," she whispered, hurriedly. "Now is your time to escape."

He came out, shaking himself like a water dog.

"Uh!" he exclaimed. "I have been in one position too long."

"I am sorry," began Constance.

"Not for me," he interrupted. "Like most listeners, I heard what I did not bargain for; but—I have not heard too much. Miss Wardour, don't reproach yourself, or Fate; that little extra hearing was a god-send. And now, let me out, quickly, before some one else claims your time."

She looked cautiously out into the hall then closed the door again.

"I wish I could know your opinion regarding this business—all of it," she said, wistfully. "I begin to feel helpless, like a rudderless mariner."

"It's a hard knot," he said, going toward the door; "a very hard knot. But we will untie it, Miss Wardour, and then you will understand all these things. Now tell me, where is your detective going next?"

"I do not know."

"You must find out," imperatively. "I think I can."

"And come to me in the garden."

"Very well," looking out once more. "Your way is clear, sir; go straight to the kitchen entrance."

He passed out, and went his way, swiftly, quietly, and unobserved; and Constance returned to Mr. Belknap, and the completion of her jewel list.

"The combat deepens," mused the tramp detective, as he paced slowly down the garden walk. "The plot thickens. I come for a catfish—I may catch a whale. Oh, what a knot; what a beautiful, delightful, horribly hard knot; and how my fingers itch to begin at it. But soft—easy; there is more to be tied in. Let us pay out the rope, and wait."

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