

# 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 passed as if struggling with some emotion, and Ray Vandeyck stirred uneasily, flushed slightly, and partially turned away his face. Only Clifford Heath retained his stoical calm.

"Well!" he said coolly, "Miss Wardour tells you—what?"

"That my sister has run—away."

"Oh! Well, Lamotte, I am glad you know it. It's a hard story to tell a friend."

"So thought Constance, and she would give me no particulars, she told me, letting his hand fall from before his face, to come to you."

"And why to me?" coldly.

"She said that you knew the particulars—that you brought her news."

"True; I did. Still it's a hard story to tell, Lamotte."

"And no one will tell it more kindly, I know. Say on, Heath; don't spare me, or mind Vandeyck's presence—I don't. I know that I must hear this thing, and I know that Ray is my friend. Go on, Heath; get it over soon."

Raymond Vandeyck arose and walked to the window, standing with his back toward them while Doctor Heath, in a plain, straightforward, kindly manner, told the story of Sybil's flight, just as he had told it to Constance Wardour.

For a long time after the story was done, Lamotte lay with his face buried in his arms, silent and motionless, while young Vandeyck stood like a graven image at his post by the window.

Finally, Lamotte brought himself to a sitting posture, and, with the look and tone of a man utterly crushed, said—

"Thank you, Heath. You have done me a kindness. This is the most terrible, most unheard of thing. My poor sister must be mad. She has not been herself, now that I remember, for some weeks. Something has been preying upon her spirits. There has been—by heavens! Ray, Ray Vandeyck, can you guess at the cause of this madness?"

Raymond Vandeyck wheeled suddenly, and came close to his interlocutor, the hot, angry blood surging to his face.

"There was plenty of method in this madness," he sneered. "As to the cause, it may not be so hard to discover as you seem to imagine. And, before they could recover from their astonishment, he was out and away, banging the door fiercely as he went."

For a moment the lurid light gleamed in Frank Lamotte's eye, and it seemed that another "attack" was about to seize him, but he calmed himself with a mighty effort, and turning toward Doctor Heath, said, plaintively—

"Has all the world run mad, Heath? What the devil does that fellow mean?"

"I know no more than you, Lamotte," said the doctor, upon whose face sat a look of genuine surprise. "I don't think he quite knows himself. He has been sadly worked up by this affair."

"Humph! I suppose so. Well, for Sybil's sake, I forgive him, this once; but—I hope he will outgrow these hallucinations."

"Doubtless he will," replied the doctor, somewhat drily. "I say, Lamotte, you had better run down to my house, and turn in for a couple of hours; you look done up—and you can't stand much more of this sort of thing. I must go now, to see old Mrs. Grady, over at the mills."

"Then I will just stretch myself here, Heath," replied Lamotte. "I don't feel equal to a start out just now; and, look here, old fellow," turning a shade paler, as he spoke, "deal gently with a fallen rival after this—disgrace. Of course, I quit the field; but—don't ride over me too hard."

The doctor drew on his riding gloves with grave precision, put his hat on his head, and took up his riding whip; then he turned toward Lamotte.

"I suppose you refer to Miss Wardour?" he said blandly.

"Of course."

"Then rest easy. I do not pretend in that quarter. Miss Wardour is yours for all me; and—you are not such a fool as to think that she will let your sister's affair alter her feelings for you—if she cares for you?"

Lamotte sprang up, staring with surprise.

"Why, but—Heath, you owned yourself my rival!"

"True."

"And—upon my word, I believe you were ahead of the field."

"True again; but—I have withdrawn."

And Doctor Heath went out, closed the door deliberately, and ran lightly down the stairs. He found Ray Vandeyck loitering on the pavement.

"I knew you would be down presently," said Vandeyck, anxiously; "I want to say, Heath, don't notice what I said to that mad. He maddened me; above all, don't think that one word I uttered was intended to reflect upon her."

"He has withdrawn," muttered Francis Lamotte, settling himself back as comfortably as possible, and clasping his hands behind his head.

"And he means what he says; something has happened in my absence; I can't understand it, but it's so much the better for me."

CHAPTER XII.

Saturday, Sunday, Monday, three days; three nights. The events chronicled in the foregoing chapters, crowded themselves into the space of three days.

But these were exceptional days; life does not move on thus, especially in the

usually staid and well-regulated town of W—. Men and women are not qualified to run a long, high pressure race. Action, and then—reaction. Reaction from every emotion, every sorrow, every joy. God help us.

We weep for days, but not for years. We suffer, but here and there comes a respite from our pain. We live in a delirium of joy for a brief space; and vegetate in dullness, in apathy, in hardness of heart, in indifference, or in despair, according to our various natures, for the rest of our natural lives. So let it be, it is the lot common to all.

"No man can hide from it, but it will find him out. Nor run from it, but it overtakes him."

After the robbery, after the flight, after the coming and departure of the two detectives, dullness settled down upon our friends in W—.

It is needless to chronicle the effect of the news of their daughter's flight, upon Mr. and Mrs. Lamotte.

That is a thing we can all understand; we can picture it for ourselves.

Mrs. Lamotte shut herself up in her chamber, and refused to be comforted by family or friends. Mr. Lamotte, bitterly grieved, terribly shocked, did all that a father could do, which was in effect, nothing.

One day, the mail brought them a copy of the marriage certificate of Sybil Lamotte and John Burrill; but that was all. Where the fugitives had gone, could not be discovered.

Francis Lamotte went about as usual; with a little more of haughtiness, a little more reserve, and just a tinge of melancholy in his manner. He took Constance at her word, and came and went very much as of old, but was so watchful over himself, so subdued, and as she thought, improved in manner, that she declared confidentially to her aunt that he had become "really quite a comfortable person to have in one's parlor."

She ceased snubbing him altogether, and received him with the frank graciousness that used to charm Doctor Heath; assuring herself, often, that "trouble was improving poor Frank."

Evan Lamotte was Evan Lamotte still. Now drunk, now sober; a little more furious and ready to quarrel than usual, when in his cups; a little more taciturn and inclined to solitude in his sober moments.

Doctor Heath went about among his patients, wearing his usual cheery smile, speaking the usual comforting word, smoking, philosophizing, rallying his friends, satirizing his enemies, genial, independent, inscrutable as ever. He never called at Wardour Place, of course. He never sought an opportunity for meeting or seeing Constance, and he never avoided her; altogether, his conduct, from a romantic standpoint, was very reprehensible.

And Constance; perhaps of them all, these three days had effected the greatest change in her, as any chain of startling or strange events must, in a measure, change the current of thought and feeling in a life that has hitherto floated under a roseate cloud, on a sea without a ripple. She had been rocked by storm waves; had seen a bark shipwrecked close beside her; had even encountered mutiny in her own craft; when the lull came, and she drifted quietly, she found herself forever face to face with the facts that sorrow and trouble were abroad in the land that crime existed outside of the newspapers; that heartache and self-dissatisfaction were possibilities, and that even a queen absolute might come under the shadow of each and all. Not that Constance had never been aware of all these things, but we never can realize what we have never experienced.

We look sadly sympathetic, and murmur "poor things," when we see some mourner weeping over a dead loved one, but we never comprehend the sorrow until we bury our own dead.

Constance had loved Sybil Lamotte as a sister; she thought and sorrowed not a little over the strange freak Fate had played with her friend's life, and she wondered often if Doctor Heath had really lost all regard for her; she knew, as what woman does not, that a warm regard had once existed; and she assured herself that whether he had or not, was a matter of no consequence to her. "She had not the slightest interest in Doctor Heath," so she told Mrs. Alston, and, like him, she never sought nor avoided a meeting.

It is singular, however, that a man who possessed for her "not the slightest interest" should so often present himself to her thoughts, and certain it is that at this period of our story her mind had a most provoking habit of running away from a variety of subjects straight to Clifford Heath, M. D. But women at best are strange creatures, and subject to singular phenomena.

Mrs. Alston just here experienced some dissatisfaction; Clifford Heath was with her a favorite; Francis Lamotte was her pet hatred. To see the favorite made conspicuous by his absence, and have his name, like that of a disinherited daughter, tabooed from the family converse, while the obnoxious Francis, because of his provokingly good behavior, made rapid strides into the good graces of the queen of the castle, would have exasperated most good, maneuvering old ladies, but Mrs. Alston maneuvered principally for her own comfort, so she sighed a little, regretted the present state of affairs in a resigned and becoming manner, ceased to mention the name of

Doctor Heath, and condescended to receive Francis graciously, after that young man had made a special call, during which he saw only Mrs. Alston, and apologized amply and most humbly for his unceremonious ejection of that lady in favor of Constance, on the day when the former undertook, "as gently as possible," to break to him the news of his sister's flight.

To make an apology gracefully is in itself, an art; and this art Francis Lamotte was skilled in; indeed but for a certain physical weakness, he would have been an ornament to the diplomatic service. Alas, that there must always be a "but" in the way of our moral completeness, our physical perfection and our life's success. Days and weeks passed on, and the household of Wardour remained in utmost quiet; that at Mapleton, shrouded in gloom and sorrowful seclusion. Mrs. Lamotte saw no one. Mr. Lamotte went out only to look after his business interests.

When the copy of Sybil's marriage certificate came, Frank, like a loyal knight, came to Constance with the news, told it with a sad countenance and in few words, and went away soon and sorrowfully.

One day, not long after, Mrs. Alston returned from the town where she had spent four long hours in calling upon the wives of the Episcopalian, the Unitarian and the Presbyterian ministers, for Mrs. Alston was a liberal soul, and hurled herself into Constance's favorite sitting room, in a state of unusual excitement.

"Well, Con," she panted, pulling hard the while at her squeezed glove, "I've found it out; and she dropped into the easiest chair, and pulled and panted and panted."

Constance looked up from a rather uninteresting "Novel with a Moral," and asked, as indifferently as possible:—"What have you found out, auntie?"

"About Sybil."

(To be Continued.)

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