

The Diamond Coterie

By LAWRENCE M. LYNCH

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Author of "A Woman's Crime," "John Arthur's Ward," "The Lost Witness," "A Slender Clue," "Dangerous Ground," "Against Odds," Etc., Etc.

(Continued)

"Trust you will pardon me."

They turned swiftly, neither had faced the door; both had been too preoccupied to observe or hear. How long he had been a sterner he alone could tell; but there stood Mr. Jerry Belknap, private detective, one hand resting on the handle of the closed door, the other holding an open note book.

Doctor Heath vouchsafed him one dark glance, then bending above the uplifted hand of Constance Wardour, he looked straight down into her eyes, and said in a low, tense voice,

"Miss Wardour, your words have been not an accusation, but an insult; as such, I can only accept them—in silence; good morning."

Then he turned, waved the private detective haughtily from before the door, and strode out, his heels ringing firm upon the hall marble as he went.

"I fear I intruded," said Mr. Belknap, innocently. "I have just finished making some notes in the library, and am ready to proceed to the upper floor."

"Breakfast," it was Nelly who appeared with this announcement, which was welcome, at least to Mr. Belknap, and pale, silent, subdued, Constance motioned him to precede her to the dining room.

"I'm sure to be in a situation," mused the girl with a rueful grimace. "If it's only a tete-a-tete breakfast with a detective."

CHAPTER VIII.

"Hunt Honor," said Miss Wardour, sweeping unceremoniously into her aunt's dressing room, "you really must come to my relief."

Mrs. Alston seated in a big dressing chair, with a tempting breakfast tray drawn close beside her, looked up serene and comfortable, and said, after setting down her porcelain chocolate cup with great care,

"Yes!" with the rising inflection.

"I'm exhausted, bothered, bored," continued the young lady, flinging herself down upon the nearest ottoman. "I wish my old diamonds had never had an existence. I wish Grandmama Wardour had had better sense."

"Have a cup of chocolate," suggested Mrs. Alston.

"I won't," snapped Constance, belligerently. "I have breakfasted if you please, auntie," lowering her voice to a tone of mock mystery, "we have got another detective in the house."

"So Nelly tells me," reaching out for another roll.

"And he has breakfasted with me."

Mrs. Alston laid down the roll, turned for a moment to gaze at her niece; and, reading in that fair upturned face, the fact that its owner was in a state of mutiny against the properties and all things else that might come in opposition to her will, she took up her roll and buttered it carefully as she said—

"Well! that's quite like you. What sort of a man is he?"

"Splendid," with a shrug of the shoulders, "smooth as oil, polished as ivory; a Chesterfield in ill fitting clothes."

"And, a detective?"

"Well, why not? Somehow he has picked up all the arts and graces of a gentleman."

"Really! Not much like the other one then?"

"Not in the least. The other is eccentric, explosive, amusing. This one is like a lawyer; very non-committal, not at all inclined to tell all he knows."

"Oh! have you told him about the chloroform?"

"Yes; he has the bottle."

"Well, what did he say?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Not a word."

"Goodness gracious! and you breakfasted with him?"

"Yes; and he has spent half an hour or more in the drawing room. I have told him all I had to tell, and he is now prowling about my dressing room."

"But what does he think about this affair?"

"I don't know," indifferently.

"Why, it didn't take you all breakfast time to tell your story?"

"Oh, no; I told my story and Mr. Belknap listened very attentively; made some entries in his note book, remarked that he would have a report ready for me in the course of the day, and then turned his back upon the subject."

"Mercy!"

"He discussed the new opera, asked me if I had seen Neilson in Twelfth Night, gave a brilliant description of a young French drama by a young French author, gave me his opinion of Dickens, and looked his opinion of myself."

"What a remarkable person."

"Exceedingly so. His remarks have quite exhausted me."

"Now, Con," reproachfully.

"Now, auntie, don't plead, my heart is adamant. If you don't go and interview that man for the remainder of my stay I shall order William to throw him out of my dressing-room window; not that I have a rooted antipathy for him, he is certainly a clever man, and no doubt a good officer. But I am worn out, unfit for duty, and—I have another matter to attend to."

"Oh!" ejaculates Mrs. Alston arising, "then, my child, I am ready, or almost ready, to go and inspect your new detective."

Accordingly Mrs. Alston goes to her mirror, touches up her dressing-cap, gives a pat here, a shake there, and then

ruming her pumage like some magpie on a bird, follows her niece.

Across the hall they find the detective inspecting the little safe, and hurriedly introducing Mrs. Alston, and making her own excuses, Constance hastens away and down stairs.

Down the stairs and out of the house, first because she felt oppressed and needed the soothing effects of fresh air and exercise, and, second, because she expected the tramp detective to be somewhere in the vicinity, and, for some reason, she wanted to see him. In spite of the fact that she had just declared herself bored, and desperate, and anxious to be alone in spite of the fact that she had fled from detective number two, she wanted to see number one for a woman's reason. Having quarrelled desperately with Clifford Heath, she was immediately possessed by an insane desire to hear some one speak of him, and speak well of him. This man had treated Doctor Heath from the first with the utmost respect. He was undoubtedly pleased at their chance meeting after all might not this secret which lay between the two be a perfectly honorable one?

In fact, Miss Wardour wanted to see Detective Bathurst, not as Detective Bathurst, but as the man who knew Doctor Clifford Heath better than she herself knew him. Of her diamonds, she never thought at all.

She felt depressed, dissatisfied, yet not quite prepared to blame herself in any way. She was possessed by more uncomfortable feelings than she could have analyzed or described, yet was too consistent a woman to be so soon ready to admit, even to herself, that she had wronged Doctor Heath. Indeed, she was more angry than ever with that unfortunate man. Had he not capped the climax of his iniquities by flying off at a tangent, and leaving her in a most uncomfortable position?

The grounds about Wardour Place were large, well shaded, and laid out with a network of walks. With a view to the avoiding of those paths overlooked by the windows of her dressing room, or other rooms where her aunt and the detective were likely to be, Constance kept to the north and east walks, thus coming near the river, which ran north and south, and toward which the eastern, or near, portion of the grounds sloped down.

Walking thus, and gazing riverward, Constance saw a form approaching, which she soon recognized as that of the detective tramp.

Glancing quickly about to see if any of the servants were in the grounds, and assuring herself that the way was clear, she went forward to where he could see her, before approaching too near.

Gazing fixedly at him, a slight movement of his hand told her that he had seen, and was alert; and then she made a gesture northward, and, turning that way herself, disappeared from his sight among the shrubbery.

On the north, the grounds were bounded by the orchard wall, over which drooped the branches of huge old apple trees, and down close to the eastern boundary of this same orchard, a small iron gate opened into it. Toward this gate Constance walked, avoiding any appearance of unseemly haste, and toward the eastern wall, hard by, went the tramp detective, looking innocent of any thought or purpose, save to intercept the lady, and beg for a dinner, a dollar, or a dime.

Reaching the gate, Constance passed through it into the orchard, and, almost at the same moment, the tramp bounded over the wall, and stood bowing beside her.

"Come into the grounds," said Constance, waiving all ceremony. "If we are seen talking there, it will look less suspicious. My servants are quite accustomed to see me interviewing tramps."

She led the way back into the grounds, closed the wicket, and walked along the orchard wall to a rustic bench close under the bending boughs of a great tree. Here she seated herself, and the tramp, leaning against a tree a few paces from her, turned upon her a look of proper supplication, and said—

"Now I think we are ready for observers."

"Quite. None of my servants saw you last night, and they are not likely to come here in any case. We shall hardly be disturbed."

"You think so? May I ask how long you have been absent from the house?"

"About fifteen minutes, I should think."

"Well, in fifteen minutes more Mr. Belknap will be out looking at the grounds, and for you."

Constance uttered a low exclamation of surprise.

"Ah!" said she, "you know that already. Pray tell me how you are more puzzling than a Chinese juggler."

"No jugglery about this, however," he replied, looking somewhat amused. "I met Mr. Belknap face to face at your very gate; I have seen him wear that farmer's disguise before, hence I recognized him."

"And he?"

"Did not recognize me."

"Yet you know each other?"

"Slightly, yes," with a droll look in

his eyes, of which Constance took note.

"Now tell me, Mr. Bathurst, is Mr. Belknap a good detective?"

"Mr. Belknap is a smart man, Miss Wardour; he understands his business thoroughly."

"He equivocates," thought Constance; aloud she said,

"And I need not fear to trust any business in his hands?"

"You need not fear," he replied, with odd emphasis. "And now," he continued, "time presses; you received your package, Miss Wardour?"

Constance felt uneasy, this man seemed to find out everything; did he know of what she had accused Doctor Heath?

"I received it an hour ago," she replied.

"Miss Wardour," asked he, fixing his eyes upon her face, "have you any suspicion as to who these robbers were?"

For a moment Constance seemed half paralyzed with fright; then she answered firmly,

"No, sir; not the shadow of a suspicion; but—you have."

"If I have, it is not more than a shadow—at present. Now, may I ask you some questions, not just to the point but which, for my own reasons, I wish answered."

She nodded assent.

"Can you tell me how many medical men you have in W—?"

Constance reflected finally she said,

"I think there are seven, in all."

"Ah! all in practice?"

"Not all; two are retired, one is an invalid, doing but little."

"Thank you; and how many of them have assistants or students?"

"Only two, to my knowledge, Doctor Benoit and—Doctor Heath."

"And who are these young men—I suppose they are young men? Can you give me any information concerning them?"

"The young man with Doctor Benoit is a stranger to me, he comes, I believe, from one of the neighboring towns; the one with Doctor Heath," here, in spite of herself, Constance colored slightly, "is the son of one of our wealthiest citizens. He had, I believe, been reading a little in the city during the winter before Doctor Heath established himself here; since when he has remained in W—, and read in Doctor Heath's office, when it has suited him to do so; he is like many young men of great expectations."

"And his name?"

"His name," hesitating a little, "is Francis Lamotte."

"Thank you; and now, Miss Wardour, I want to ask at least three favors of you, in return for which you may command me to any extent."

"Ask them," replied Constance, feeling inwardly that she was outgrowing surprise.

"First, will you promise me—I know that you keep your promises—not to repeat one word of this conversation to Doctor Heath?"

"Doctor Heath is not my father confessor," she said coldly; and then remembering the sort of man she was addressing, she added as best she could, "Although from what you saw last night, you might almost have fancied him such. I promise in any case to keep secret this interview."

"Will you promise, above all, to keep it from Mr. Belknap; to keep everything concerning me from his knowledge?"

Constance laughed.

"So far as I can," she replied. "Mr. Belknap is a detective; let him find out things as you seem to do."

"I don't find out everything, more's the pity," he replied; then hesitating slightly over the question, "May I rely on your aunt?"

"I promise for my aunt," replied Constance, laughing again; "she is very loyal."

"Thank you. Now there is one thing more I very much wish, for reasons which no doubt you will know in good time, to see or hear the report of Mr. Jerry Belknap, private detective. This I know, is asking much, but you will have no cause to regret it if you enable me to obtain this knowledge."

Constance looked perplexed, and hesitated in her answer.

"You distrust Mr. Belknap," she said finally. "I thought—"

He throws up his hand somewhat impatiently.

"You jump at conclusions," he interrupted; "a detective's motives must be taken for granted. It is not distrust that causes me to ask this favor; I could not tell you my reason without unraveling a long web, and it is not time to begin the process; I am still in the realm of conjecture. So you won't help me to the result of Mr. Belknap's investigation, Miss Wardour? I am sorry; it would save time for me, for I fully intend to find it out in some way."

Constance smiled in spite of herself; she admired this man's cool way of mastering the situation; she felt that it would be policy to let him have his way, since he would take it whether she would or no. But the imp of caprice had not quite deserted her, and now he goaded her on to her own downfall. Looking up, suddenly, she asked—

"Mr. Bathurst, why did you ask me if I suspected you stole my diamonds?"

"I didn't," smiling oddly.

Constance stared.

"I asked if you guessed who the robbers were."

"But—," she began; but the detective drawing a step nearer, and speaking in a guarded tone, interrupts her.

"I am satisfied that you were robbed on Saturday night, Miss Wardour; I am sure that you have no clue to the burglars; no suspicion as to their identity; but, I am not so sure that you do not know precisely where to look for the Wardour diamonds at this moment?"

Constance flushed, and then turned pale. She had found her match; she was cornered, mastered, but she must give one last scratch.

"Having divined so much," she said bitterly. "I suppose you intend to find them too?"

He drew himself up haughtily. "I am a detective, madam, not a spy; so long as your diamonds give you no uneasiness they have no interest for me. When you need my services they are yours. I do not investigate mysteries from mere curiosity."

Constance felt a twinge of self-

approach. "I am behaving like a fool," she thought, in severe condemnation. "I am losing my own identity; this man is a friend to rely on, an enemy to fear. He will not bow to my whims and caprices. What has come over me? Let me try and redeem myself."

She had been musing with downcast eyes; now she looked up, straight into her companion's face. It had undergone a sudden change; the eyes, a moment since so full of fire and subtlety, were dull and expressionless. The face was vague to apathy, the mouth looked the incarnation of meekness or imbecility; even his hands had taken on a helpless feebleness in the clutch in which he held his worn-out hat. Before she could withdraw her gaze or open her lips in speech, he said in a low guarded tone—

(To be Continued.)

FOREIGN ECHOES.

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