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)

"Is Sybil—is Mrs. Burrill worse?" and then she hears the startling truth.

"John Burrill is dead. John Burrill has been murdered." In bewilderment, in amazement, she hears all there is to tell, all that the servants know. A messenger came, telling only the bare facts. John Burrill's body has been found in an old cellar; Frank has just gone, riding like a madman, to see that the body is cared for, and to bring it home. Mrs. Lamotte has been told the horrible news; has received it like an icicle; has ordered them to prepare the drawing room for the reception of the body, and has gone back to her daughter.

All this Constance hears, and then, strangely startled, and vaguely thankful that Frank is not in the house, she goes up to the sick room. Mrs. Lamotte rises to greet her, with a look upon her face that startles Constance, even more than did the news she had just heard below stairs.

Intense feeling has been for so long frozen out of that high-bred, haughty face, that the look of the eyes, the compression of the lips, the fear and horror of the entire countenance, amount almost to a transfiguration.

She draws Constance away from the bed, and into the dressing room beyond. Then, in a voice husky with suppressed emotion, she addresses her as follows:—

"Constance Wardour, I am about to place my honor, my daughter's life, the honor of all my family, in your hands. There is not another living being in whom to trust, and I must trust some one. I must, for my child's sake, have relief, or my reason, too, will desert me. Constance, that sick room holds a terrible secret—Sybil's secret. If you can share it with me, for Sybil's sake, I will try to brave this tempest, as I have braved others; if you refuse"—she paused a moment, and then whispered fiercely:—"If you refuse, I will lock that chamber door, and Sybil Lamotte shall die in her delirium before I will allow an ear that I cannot trust within those walls, or the hand of a possible enemy to administer one life-saving draught."

Over the face of Constance Wardour crept a look of horror indescribable. In an instant her mind is illuminated, and all the fearful meaning of Mrs. Lamotte's strange words is grasped and mastered. She reels as if struck by a heavy hand, and a low moan breaks from her lips. So long she stands thus, mute and awe-stricken, that Mrs. Lamotte can bear the strain of suspense no longer.

"For God's sake, speak," she gasps, "there have been those of your race who could not abandon a fallen friend."

Over the cheek, and neck, and brow, the hot, proud, loyal Wardour blood comes surging. The gray eyes lift themselves with a proud flash; low and firm comes the answer:—

"The Wardours were never Summer friends. Sybil has been a sister in prosperity; I shall be no less than a sister now. You may trust me as you would yourself; and—I am very glad you sent for me, and trusted no other."

"God bless you, Constance! No one else can be trusted. With your help I must do this work alone."

Then comes a cry from the sick room; they go back, and Constance enters at once upon her new, strange task. Her heart heavy; her hand firm; her ears, smitten by the babbling recitation of that awful secret; and her lips sealed with the seal of the Wardour honor.

All that day she is at her post. Mrs. Lamotte, who is resolved to retain her strength for Sybil's sake, lies down in the dressing room and sleeps from sheer exhaustion.

As the day wears on there is movement and bustle down stairs, they are bringing in the body of the murdered man. The undertaker goes about his work with pompous air and solemn visage; and when darkness falls John Burrill's lifeless form lies in state in the drawing room of Mapleton, that room over the splendors of which his plebian soul has gloated, his covetous eyes feasted and his ambitious bosom swelled with a sense of proprietorship. He is clothed in finest broadcloth, surrounded with costly trappings; but not one tear falls over him; not one heart grieves for him; not one tongue utters a word of sorrow or regret; he has schemed and sinned, to become a member of the aristocracy, to ally himself to the proud Lamottes; and to-night one and all of the Lamottes breathe the freer because his breathing has forever ceased. Even Constance Wardour has no pitying thought for the dead man; she keeps aloof from the drawing room, shuddering when compelled to pass its closed doors; living, John Burrill was odious to her; dead, he is loathsome.

The day passes, and Doctor Heath does not visit his patient. At intervals during the long afternoon they have discussed the question, "What shall we do to keep the patient quiet when the doctor comes?"

It is Constance who solves the problem "We must send for Doctor Benoit, Mr Lamotte; Doctor Heath's tardiness will furnish sufficient excuse, and Doctor Benoit's partial deafness will render him our safest physician."

It is a happy thought; Doctor Benoit is old, and partially deaf, but he is a thoroughly good and reliable physician.

Late that night Jasper Lamotte applies for admittance at the door of his daughter's sick room. Constance opens the door softly, and as his eyes fall upon her she fancies that a look of fierce hatred gleams at her for a moment from those sunken orbs and darkens his haggard countenance. Of course it is only a fancy. In another moment he is asking after his daughter, with grave solicitude.

"She is quiet; she must not be disturbed;" so Constance tells him. And he glides away softly, murmuring his gratitude to his daughter's friend as he goes.

It is midnight at Mapleton; in Sybil Lamotte's room the light burn dimly, and Mrs. Lamotte and Constance sit near the bed, listening with sad, set faces, to the ravings of the delirious girl.

"Ha! ha!" she cries, tossing her bare arms aloof. "How well you planned that, Constance! the Wardour diamonds; ah, they are worth keeping, they are worth plotting to keep—and it's often done—it's easy to do. Hush! Mr. Belknap, I need your help—meet me, meet me to-night, at the boat house. If a man were to disappear, never to come back, mind—what would I give? One thousand dollars! two! three! It shall be done! I shall be free! free! free! Ha! ha! Constance, your diamonds are safer than mine—but what are diamonds—I shall live a lie—let me adorn myself with lies. Why not? Why care? I will be free. You have been the tool of others, Mr. Belknap, why hesitate to serve me—you want money—here it is, half of it—when it is done, when I know it is done, I will come here again—at night—and the rest is yours."

With a stifled moan, Mrs. Lamotte leans forward, and lays a hand upon her companion's arm.

"Constance—do you know what she means?"

Slowly and shudderingly, the girl answers:—

"I fear—that I know too well."

"And—that boat-house appointment?"

"Must be kept, Mrs. Lamotte; for Sybil's sake, it must be kept, by you or me."

It is midnight. In Evan Lamotte's room lamps are burning brightly, and the fumes of strong liquor fill the air. On the bed lies Evan, with flushed face, and mud bespattered clothing; he is in a sleep that is broken and feverish, that borders in fact, upon delirium; beside him, pale as a corpse, with nerves unstrung, and trembling, sits Frank Lamotte, fearing to leave him, and loath to stay. At intervals, the sleeper grows more restless, and then starts up with wild ejaculations, or bursts of demoniac laughter. At such times, Frank Lamotte pours, from a bottle at his side, a powerful draught of burning brandy, and holds it to the frenzied lips. They drain off the liquor, and presently relapse into quiet.

It is midnight. In the library of Mapleton Jasper Lamotte sits at his desk, poring over a pile of papers. The curtains are closely drawn, the door securely locked. Now and then he rises, and paces nervously up and down the room, gesticulating fiercely, and wearing such a look as has never been seen upon the countenance of the Jasper Lamotte of society.

It is midnight. In the Mapleton drawing room, all that remains of John Burrill, lies in solemn solitary state; and, down in his cell, face downward upon his pallet, lies Clifford Heath, broad awake, and bitterly reviewing the wrongs heaped upon him by fate; realizing, to the full, his own helplessness, and the peril before him, and doggedly resolving to die, and make no sign.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Doctor Benoit was old and deaf; he was also very talkative. One of those physicians who invariably leave a titbit of news alongside of their powders and pellets. A constant talker is apt to be an indiscreet talker, and, very often, wanting in tact. Doctor Benoit was not so much deficient in tact, as in memory. In growing old, he had grown forgetful, and not being a society man, social gossip was less dear to his heart than the news of political outbreaks, business strivings, and about-town sensations. Doubtless he had heard, like all the world of W—, that Doctor Clifford Heath, had at one time, been an aspirant for the favor of the proud heiress of Wardour, and that suddenly he had fallen from grace, and was no more seen within the walls of Wardour, or at the side of its mistress on social occasions. If so, he had entirely forgotten these facts. Accordingly, during his second call, made on the morning after the inquest, he began to drop soft remarks concerning the recent horror.

Mrs. Lamotte was lying down, and Constance had decided not to arouse her when the doctor arrived, inasmuch as the patient was in one of her stupors, and not likely to rouse from it.

The arrest of a brother practitioner on such a charge as was preferred against Clifford Heath, had created no little commotion in the mind of Dr. Benoit, and he found it difficult to keep the subject off his tongue, so, after he had given Constance full instructions concerning the patient, he said, standing hat in hand near the dressing room door:—

"This is a terrible state of affairs for W—, Miss Wardour. Do you know," drawing a step nearer, and lowering his voice, "Do you know if Mr. Lamotte has been informed that O'Meara, as Heath's lawyer, demands a surgical examination?"

"As Heath's lawyer!" The room seemed to swim about her. She turned instinctively toward the door of the chamber, closed it softly, and came very close to the old doctor, lifting her pale lips to his ear.

"I don't understand you, doctor. What has Mr. O'Meara to do with the murder?"

"Hey? What's that? What is O'Meara going to do? He's going to defend young Heath." Then, seeing the startled, perplexed look upon her face, "Is it possible you have not heard about Heath's arrest?"

She shook her head, and again lifted her mouth to his ear.

"I have heard nothing; tell me all."

"It seems that there was an old feud between Heath and Burrill," began the doctor, beginning to feel that somehow he had made a blunder. "They have hunted up some pretty strong evidence against Heath, and the coroner's jury brought in a verdict against him. You know the body was found in an old cellar, close by Heath's cottage."

At this moment there came a soft tap on the outer door, which Constance at once recognized. Mechanically she moved forward and opened the door. Mrs. Lamotte stood on the threshold.

Seeing the doctor and Constance, she at once inferred that Sybil was the subject under discussion, and to insure the patient again being disturbed, beckoned the doctor to come outside.

As he stepped out into the hall, Constance, hoping to get a little information from him, came forward, and standing in the doorway, partially closed the door behind her.

"Doctor," said Mrs. Lamotte, anxiously, "do you see any change in Sybil?"

He shook his head gravely.

"There is no marked change, madam; but I see a possibility that she may return to consciousness within the next forty-eight hours, in which case I must warn you against letting her know or guess at the calamity that has befallen her."

The two women exchanged glances of relief.

"If she receives no shock until her mental balance is fully restored, her recovery may be hoped for; otherwise—"

"Otherwise, doctor?"

"Otherwise, if she retains her life, it will be at the cost of her reason."

"Oh!" moaned the mother, "death would be better than that."

There was the sound of a door opening softly down the hall. They all turned their eyes that way to see Frank Lamotte emerging from Evan's room. He came hurriedly toward them, and Constance noticed the nervous unsteadiness of his gait, the pinched and pallid look of his face, the feverish fire of his sunken eyes.

"Mother," he said, in a constrained voice, and without glancing toward Constance, "I think you had better have Doctor Benoit see Evan. I have been with him all night, and am thoroughly worn out."

"What ails Evan, Frank?"

"Too much liquor," with a shrug of the shoulders. "He is on the verge of the 'brandy madness,' he sometimes sings of. He must have powerful narcotics, and no cessation of his stimulants, or we will have him raving about the house like a veritable madman; and—I have not told him about Burrill."

A look of contrition came into the mother's face. Evan had kept his room for days, but, in her anxiety for her dearest child, she had quite forgotten him.

"Come, doctor," she said, quickly; "let us go to Evan at once."

They passed on to the lower room, leaving Constance and Frank face to face.

Constance moved back a pace as if to re-enter the dressing-room; burning with anxiety as she was, to hear more concerning Clifford Heath, her womanly instincts were too true to permit her to ask information of her discarded suitor. But Frank's voice stayed her movements.

"Constance, only one moment," he said, appealingly. "Have a little patience with me now. Have a little pity for my misery."

His misery! The words sounded hypocritical; he had never loved John Burrill over much, she knew.

"I bestow my pity whenever it is truly needed, Frank," she said, coldly, her face whitening with the anguish of her inward thought. "Do you think you are the only sufferer in this miserable affair?"

"I am the only one who can not enlist your sympathies. I must live without your love; I must bear a name disgraced, yet those who have brought about this family disgrace, even Clifford Heath, in a felon's cell, no doubt you will aid and pity; he is a martyr perhaps, while I—"

"While you—go on, sir;" fierce scorn shining from the gray eyes; bitter sarcasm in the voice.

"While I," coming closer and fairly hissing the words, "am set aside for him, a felon. Oh! you are a proud woman, and you keep your secrets well, but you can not hide from me the fact that ever since the accursed day that brought you and Clifford Heath together, he has been the man preferred by you. If I have lost you, you have none the less lost him; listen."

Before she is aware of his purpose, he has her two wrists in a vice-like grip; and bending down until his lips almost touch the glossy locks on her averted head, he is pouring out, in swift cutting sentences, the story of the inquest; all the damning evidence is swiftly rehearsed; nothing that can weigh against his rival, is omitted.

Feeling instinctively that he utters the truth; paralyzed by the weight of his words; she stands with head drooping more and more, with cheeks growing paler, with hands that tremble and grow cold in his clasp.

He sees her terror, a sudden thought possesses his brain; grasping her hands still tighter, he goes madly on:—

"Constance Wardour, in spite of the coldness between you, you love Clifford Heath. What will you do to save him?"

"This is too much! This is horrible!" She makes a mad effort to free herself from his grasp.

The question comes like a taunt, a declaration of her helplessness. Coming from him, it is maddening. It restores her courage; it makes her mistress of herself once more.

"Don't repeat that question," she says, flashing upon him a look of defiance.

"I do repeat it!" he goes on wildly. "Go to O'Meara; to whom you please; satisfy yourself that Clifford Heath has a halter about his neck; then come to me, and tell me if you will give yourself as his ransom. I can save him if I will. I will save him, only on one condition. You know what that is."

With a sudden fierce effort she frees herself from his clasp, and stands erect before him, fairly panting with the fierceness of her anger.

"Traitor! monster! Cain! Not to save all the lives of my friends; not to save the world from perdition, would I be your wife! You would denounce the destroyer of that worthless clay before us. You! Before that should happen, to save the world the knowledge that such a monster exists, I will tell the world where the guilt lies, for I know."

Before he can realize the full meaning of her words, the dressing-room door is closed between them, and Frank Lamotte stands gnashing his teeth, beating the air with his hands in a frenzy of rage and despair.

While he stands thus, a step comes slowly up the stairs; he turns to meet the gaze of his father.

"Frank," says Jasper Lamotte, in low, guarded accents, "Come down to the library at once. It is time you know the truth."

(To be Continued.)

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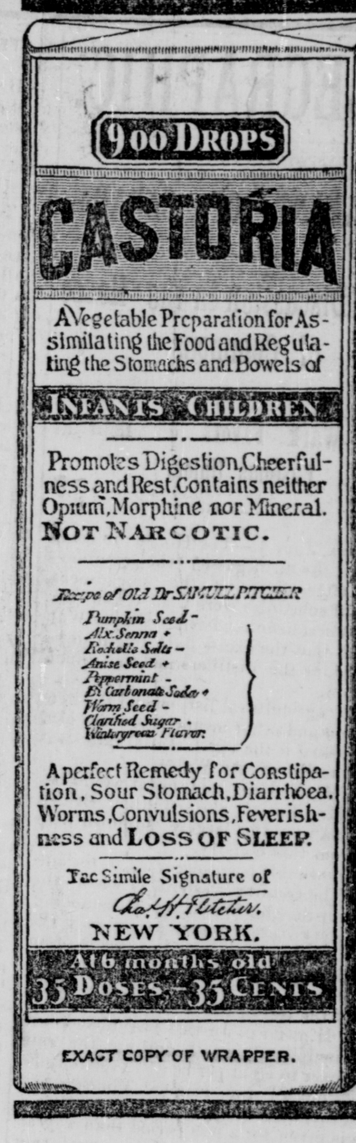

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