

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)

Of course he had heard at once of the murder, and then remembered that Lamotte was the name of the gentleman who had bought his favorite horses from his former master.

"I never pulled reins over a span equal to you," he said, with much pathos. "I never had the same liking for any other pair of critters; they was the apple of my eye, and I'd give just ten dollars to draw reins over 'em once more—even to a funeral."

His little ruse was successful; the bait was instantly swallowed, and Jerry Belknap glanced maliciously up at the closed curtains chamber windows, and muttered, as he began to saunter slowly up and down before the stable door—

"Miss Wardour, you won't find it so easy to outwit an old detective, even with the odds in your favor."

Just as the horses were being led out from the stable, a quiet-looking young man, with a somewhat rustic air, came into the yard, and approached the group near the carriage house.

"Who comes here?" asked the disguised Belknap, in a low tone, addressing the coachman.

"More than I know," replied that functionary. Then laying down a halter, just removed from the head of one of the pawing, restless horses, he turned toward the new comer, saying, patronizingly—

"Well, my man, can we do anything for you?"

The stranger appeared somewhat abashed.

"I hope I ain't in the way, gentlemen," he said, respectfully. "I came from Wardour with a message for Miss Constance. It's from the old lady, and as I see the carriages are coming and the hearse, I just thought I'd wait till the funeral was gone before I intruded."

"Oh!" said the coachman, more graciously. "Well, you won't have long to wait, then; the time's about up, and Mr. Lamotte is never behind time." Then he turned to Mr. Belknap.

"You must keep a close eye over the old one," he said; "he's full of Cain; and I say, what a lucky thing it is that your clothes are dark, and that Mrs. Lamotte won't let us wear full liveries."

"Why, yes, it's very lucky, that's so; just throw over those reins, will you. Don't be uneasy in your mind about that horse; I'll drive 'em safe enough; just you tell me when to start."

Ten minutes later, all that remained of John Burrill was borne out in its costly casket and placed in the splendid hearse at the door.

Just as he was about to cross his own threshold, Jasper Lamotte was confronted by a young man who pressed into his hand a slip of paper, and whispered in his ear—

"Read it at once, sir; it's of vital importance to you."

Stiffing an exclamation, Jasper Lamotte unfolded and glanced at the slip of paper. It contained these words—

"The man who will drive your carriage is a cursed New York detective, who has bribed your coachman."

"Don't give him the opportunity he hopes to gain for watching and listening to yourself and son."

"The bearer of this can be trusted."

"BELKNAP."

By the time he had mastered the meaning of the note, the hearse had moved forward and the pall bearers were taking their places.

Then the Lamotte carriage came into view. Mr. Lamotte placed the note in the hand of his son, who stood close beside him, and descended the steps, a stern look on his face.

"My friend, come down off that box," he said to the self-satisfied substitute procurer him by his coachman.

"The man on the box stared down at him in amazement."

"But, sir," he began.

"I want no words from you, sir; you can't drive my horses. Come down instantly."

The discomfited Belknap writhed in his seat, and looked about him helplessly.

Before were the pall-bearers, looking back from their open vehicle, and noting the scene; on the steps, and within easy hearing distance, were gathered the small knot of gentlemen, who, for courtesy's sake, or for policy's sake, had gathered to do honor to Mr. Lamotte, rather than to the poor rosewood shrouded thing that had never a mourner.

He could not explain; he could not make himself known.

"I will have you thrown off that box, sir; if you hesitate ten seconds longer," exclaimed Mr. Lamotte, impatiently, at the same time moving away and beckoning to the driver of the next carriage.

Fate was against him, and muttering curses, "not loud but deep," Jerry Belknap began to clamber reluctantly down.

Seeing this, Mr. Lamotte turned toward the bearer of the mischievous note, who had withdrawn a few paces from the group near the carriage, and beckoned him to approach.

He came forward promptly.

"Can you drive, my man?"

"Yes, sir," respectfully.

"I'll do me the favor to mount that box and drive my horses this afternoon."

"And you, sir," turning to poor Belknap, "get on my premises and keep off."

And so it came about that Jerry Belknap, private detective, found himself once more outwitted, and "Mr. Smith, the Look-alike," drove the carriage containing

taining John Burrill's chief mourners.

"Pardon this little scene, gentlemen," said Mr. Lamotte, turning to his friends, "but I happen to know that the man I dismissed is drunk."

Half an hour later a servant tapped softly at the door where Constance kept watch, and said—

"There's a boy below, Miss Wardour, who says he has an important message for you, and must deliver it in person."

Constance went immediately down to find our old friend George, the image boy, in the hall below.

She smiled at sight of him, hoping to obtain some news of Bathurst. But he only bowed, as if to a queen, placed in her hand a small, sealed envelope; and before she could utter a word, she was standing alone in the crape-hung hall, while the boy's steps could be heard ringing on the stones outside.

Standing there, Constance hastily opened the envelope. It contained a letter and a scrap of paper. Glancing at the scrap, she read these words—

"Miss Wardour—Enclosed find a letter which, for reasons which I shall explain later, I pilfered from you on the night of our first meeting. It has accomplished the purpose for which I took it, and I hasten to restore it. BATHURST."

Constance turned her eye once more upon the paper in her hand, looked closer and exclaimed: "It is; it is Sybil's lost letter!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"Dr. Heath, here is another visitor." Clifford Heath turned slowly away from the small iron-barred window; he looked a trifle disturbed by this announcement, for he had just been interviewed by Mr. O'Meara, who for the first time had presented Mr. Wedron, and the two had left him much to think about.

The look of annoyance left his face, however, and a stare of surprise took its place, when following upon the footsteps of the janitor, came Constance Wardour, not closely veiled and drooping, after the manner of prison-visiting females in orthodox novels, but with her fair face unobscured, and her graceful figure at its proudest pose.

The haughtiness all departed from face and bearing, however, when the door closed behind her and she found herself alone with the man she had falsely accused.

Misfortune had not humbled Clifford Heath. When the first momentary look of surprise had left his face, he stood before her as proudly erect, as icily courteous, as if he were receiving her in her own parlor.

"Doctor Heath," began Constance, in low, contrite tones, "some months ago I brought a wrongful accusation against you. I wronged you deeply; let me do myself the justice to say that almost immediately I was convinced of the injustice I had done you, of the utter insanity of my own behavior, but—" blushing rosily, "I never found the letter, and how could I come to you and say, I have changed my mind, without a reason. Less than an hour ago, this note was put into my hands, and with it that unfortunate lost letter. This enables me to say, Doctor Heath, I deeply regret the insult I offered you, and I ask you to be magnanimous, and to pardon me."

She put the note in his hand, and he read it, without uttering a word; stood silent for a moment, as if to collect his thoughts, and then said—

"Miss Wardour, I am glad that this affair has been cleared up; when a man has so many dark shadows hanging over him, he is thankful for the smallest glimpse of sunlight. It is like your generosity to come in person."

"But you have not said that you forgive me, Doctor Heath; fully and freely, remember."

"Fully and freely I forgive you, then, Miss Wardour," smilingly, he replied. "After all, the mistake was a natural one. Since I have been an inmate of this cell, I have learned to see myself as others see me. Why should I not come under suspicion, especially after hearing my words to Bathurst? By and by, this note from Bathurst, you tell me that you received it to-day?"

"To-day, since noon."

"And it is dated to-day; then," looking at her questioningly, "Bathurst must be in town."

"Yes," dropping her eyes, confusedly. "That is, I think so; and scarcely heeding herself in the doctor's chair, and leaning one arm against the table, looked up into his face, saying, with a spice of her old manner, so familiar to him in the past—

"Having forgiven me so generously, Doctor Heath, don't you think it would be quite proper to shake hands?"

He looked down upon her, a strange light leaping into his eyes. But he did not approach. He lifted a large, shapely hand, and surveyed it sorrowfully.

"It looks as clean as any hand, Miss Wardour, but there is a stain upon it."

"A stain! No, sir. Do you think that I believe in your guilt?"

Again the quick light flashed in his eyes, and now he came a step nearer.

"Do you believe in my innocence?"

"Beyond a doubt."

"When I said 'there is a stain upon my hand,' I did not mean the stain of guilt, but of suspicion, of accusation."

"There is no stain upon your hand, Doctor Heath. What is this I hear about

you? They tell me you will make no defense."

He smiled down at her. "I could make but one defense, and that—"

"And that?"

"And that, Miss Wardour, I would not make."

"Why?"

She was straining every nerve to preserve her composure; words came from her lips like frozen heartbeats.

"Because—Miss Wardour, do not ask me why."

"I do ask; I persist. Why? Why? Why?"

"Because—I see you are as imperious as ever—because I can only save myself by giving the real murderer up to justice."

"She was on her feet in an instant, all her enforced calmness gone, unutterable misery in her face and voice.

"You know," she cried. "You! Oh! my God, what shall I do?"

"Have no fear, Miss Wardour; have not I said I will keep my own counsel?"

"But, you! You! Oh, there is no reason why you should not speak; you are not bound! You are not—oh, what am I saying!" She sank back into her seat, panting and wild-eyed.

"Miss Wardour, calm yourself," he said, gently. "I am bound. It is my pleasure to keep this secret. Listen. A short time ago I received a visit from my lawyers. They told me—among other things, they thought it best that I should know—that you knew who did the deed, and that you would have us both saved, innocent and guilty alike. Before that, I had determined to keep silence; now I am doubly resolved. For your sake, I will not accuse Frank Lamotte."

"Frank—you will not accuse Frank Lamotte? And for my sake!" she almost shrieked. "For God's sake, explain. What is Frank Lamotte to me? Of what can you accuse him?"

It was Clifford's Heath's turn to lose his composure. How could he interpret her words? Was she trying to deceive him?

"Miss Wardour," he said, almost sternly, "do you wish me to understand that Francis Lamotte is nothing to you?"

"Nothing to me! the vilest, the basest, the most treacherous, the most abject of all human creatures, that is what Frank Lamotte is to me!"

Uncontrollable scorn rang in her voice; rising anger, too. How dared he couple her name with that of Frank Lamotte?

From the chaos of meaning and mysteries revolving through his mind, Clifford Heath seized upon and clung to one idea, held it in silence for a moment, then let it burst forth in words.

"Then—you are not Frank Lamotte's promised wife?"

"I! great heavens! no."

"And never have been?"

"And never have been."

Clifford Heath drew a long, deep breath. For a moment a look of gladness beamed in his eye, then it died out suddenly, as he said, almost gloomily—

"And yet, you have said that he must be saved at all hazards. Knowing his guilt, I still am here in his place."

"In his place, oh," she came toward him with a swift, eager movement. "I begin to see! Doctor Heath, you think Frank Lamotte the guilty one?"

"I know it," grimly.

A look of relief came over her face. She breathed freely.

"You believe this," she said at last, "and yet you are here. If you have evidence against Frank Lamotte, why do you occupy a felon's cell? Why not put him in your place?"

"I have told you why. It was for your sake."

She lowered her eyes and drew back a little, but he followed her, and standing before her, looked down into her face with a persistent, searching gaze. "You must understand me now," he said, firmly, "when I believed that you loved Frank Lamotte, I said 'Then I will not stand forth and accuse the man she loves, for—I love her, and she must not be unhappy.'"

A great sob rose in her throat. A wave of crimson swept over her brow. She stood before him with clasped hands and drooping head.

"But for that meddlesome slip of paper," he went on, "I should not have been driven from the field, and this treachery of Lamotte's could never have been practiced upon me. Do you remember a certain day when you sent for Ray Vandeyck and he came to you from my office? Well, on that day Francis Lamotte told me that you were his promised wife, and when Ray came back, he verified the statement, having received the information from your lips. Once I hoped to come to you and say, after lifting for your eyes and the veil of mystery, which I have allowed to envelope my past: 'Constance Wardour, I love you; I want you for my very own, my wife!' Now, mountains have arisen between us; I can not offer you a hand with the shadow of a stain upon it; not a name that is tarnished by doubt and suspicion. However this affair may end for me, that hope is ended now."

It had come; the decisive moment. She could go away now with sealed lips, and it would end indeed. She could turn away from him, leaving happiness behind her; taking with her his happiness, too; or, she could speak, and then—

porary guardian; and that I sent next for Detective Bathurst, warning him that you were surrounded by enemies. Did they tell you that, when I learned of your arrest I left my place by Sybil Lamotte, who is delirious and yet clings to me constantly, and came to them, offering them all my fortune if they would only save me you?"

"Did you do this—Constance?"

"I have done this. Have I not earned the right, openly, before all the world, to be your champion, your truest friend, your—"

"My queen! my darling! my very own!"

All his calm is gone, all his haughtiness of bearing; with one swift movement he snatches her to his heart, and she rests in his embrace, shocked at her own boldness, and unspeakably happy.

Who dare intrude upon a lover's interview? Who dares to snatch the first coy love words from a maiden's lips, and give them to a world grown old in love making, and appraising each tender word by its own calloused old heart?

For the time all is forgotten, save one fact, they love each other well.

By and by, other thoughts come, forcing their way like unwelcome guests.

"Constance," he says, after a long interval, "you have made me anything but indifferent to my fate. Now I shall begin to struggle for my freedom; but—do you realize what a network of false testimony they have woven about me?"

"Do I realize it?" she cried. "Yes, far more than you do, or can, and—you said something about Frank Lamotte. Has he sought to injure you?"

"Constance, I thought you knew," turning upon her a look of surprise. "I thought you knew his guilt. Who, but Frank Lamotte, could gain access to my office to purloin my handkerchief and my knife? He had a duplicate key, and I found that key in the old cellar beside the body of John Burrill."

The look of perplexity on her face deepens into one of actual distress.

Could it be, that after all, Frank had forestalled that other one?

Back upon her memory came his words, "I can save him if I will." Where there is room for doubt there is room for hope. What if another hand had anticipated that of the paid assassin? She resolved to cling to this hope with desperation.

If there was evidence so strong against Frank Lamotte, let him take her lover's place. Why not? She began to see many things in a new light; she peered forward, catching a view of the partial truth, "as in a glass, darkly." One thing was clear, however, they must act at once! No time must be lost!

She sat before him thinking thus, yet seemingly powerless to act or speak!

"Constance. Has the possibility of Frank Lamotte's guilt overwhelmed you?"

"The possibility!" she exclaimed, starting up suddenly. "No, I know him capable of baser things than murder."

"Of baser things! My darling, what do you mean?"

"Don't ask me now; there is no time to waste in talking of him; I am going straight to your lawyers this moment; I am going to send them to you, and you shall tell them every thing."

"Despot!" His eyes devouring her.

"Of course! I am always that. They will say it is time some one took you in charge. Are you going to be dumb any more?"

(To be Continued.)

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