

# 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.)

"Some one is approaching. Look behind me, Miss Wardour, and carefully, not to excite suspicion."

"She turned her gaze cautiously in the direction indicated, and saw coming slowly toward them, Mr. Belknap and Mrs. Alston."

"It is Mr. Belknap," she said, nodding easily at the new comers as she spoke, "and my aunt. Have no fears, sir, everything shall be as you wish. I will engage you."

Constance was herself again.

"Aunt Honor," she said, as the two came within hearing distance, "you find me at my old tricks."

"Old tricks indeed!" replied her aunt, with more subtlety of meaning than she often employed.

Constance arose and swept past the supposed tramp, without bestowing a glance upon him.

"What would you do aunt?" she said, with an air of honest anxiety that would have done credit to an actress, "here is this man again. You know I promised to try and help him when he was here before. Simon needs an assistant, he tells me; would you try him as under-gardener?"

Throughly drilled in the art of aiding and abetting her niece, Mrs. Alston proved equal to the emergency.

"It couldn't do any harm," she said, surveying the gentleman tramp somewhat superciliously. "He looks quite respectable, for that sort of a person."

Constance stifled an inclination to laugh as she said, briskly:—

"Then we will try him, and I'll just take him to the kitchen, and tell cook what to do with him until Simon comes."

"Now just let me do that Con," remonstrated Mrs. Alston, "Mr. Belknap wishes to talk with you about the servants; remain here, and I will attend to this person."

"Very well," responded Constance, indifferently, at the same time realizing the expediency of allowing the detective an instant opportunity for dropping a word of warning in the ear of her relative. "Tell the cook to give him something to eat, and now Mr. Belknap, you and I may walk on."

"Just follow me, my man," called Mrs. Alston, in a tone of loftiest patronage, and the newly appointed under-gardener, beaming with gratitude, passed by Miss Wardour and Mr. Belknap, and followed the portly figure kitchenward with eager alacrity.

Meantime, Constance, eager to engross Mr. Belknap's attention, turned toward him a smiling face, and said:—

"Now, Mr. Belknap, I am at your disposal for a short time; fate seems against my obtaining the rest I came out here to seek, but your business is in my interest, and I am not ungrateful; you wished to say something about my servants."

"I wish to question your servants separately, Miss Wardour."

Constance opened her eyes in quick surprise, then she answered quietly:—

"To question my servants! Oh, certainly, Mr. Belknap, when, and where?"

"This evening would suit me; I am going to look about the surrounding country during the day."

"This evening then, after dinner; will that suit you?"

"Admirably, say at half past eight," and having completed his arrangements in this business-like manner, Mr. Belknap asked permission to pass through the orchard, received it, and, bowing gravely, went through the wicket, and walked swiftly between the rows of apple trees straight northward.

At six o'clock that evening, Miss Wardour sat for the gardener.

"Simon," she said sweetly to the cross-looking old man, "I engaged a new man to-day, perhaps you have seen him. I don't expect he can be very useful to you just at first, and I want you to give him very light tasks, and treat him kindly; he is a very unfortunate man. If we find that we can't make him useful after a few days' trial, we will pay him a month's wages and let him go. That will help him a little."

Then she sent for the new man.

"I thought you might wish to hear the latest report from Mr. Belknap," she said graciously. "If I am to be your ally, I intend to keep nothing back; but I can't help fearing that he may suspect your identity."

"You need not," he replied with confident ease. "He has every reason for supposing me in California at this moment; besides, he does not know me well enough to be able to recognize me under a good disguise; our acquaintance," he added dryly, "has been somewhat one-sided, with the advantage so far on my side. When I told you that I knew Mr. Belknap well, I did not intend to imply that he knew me equally well."

"Then I will trouble myself no more about the matter," said she lightly. "Mr. Belknap wishes to examine the servants, that is what I wished to tell you."

"Very proper in Mr. Belknap."

"Oh! is it? I thought it very absurd. My servants are honesty itself."

"So much the better; Mr. Belknap knows how to go to work, Miss Wardour, pray feel no prejudice."

"Oh, not at all," ironically. "Now about the report. Be within easy call to-morrow morning, please, I think we will have it then."

"Thanks."

"I suppose it will be best to have you present, that is, within hearing. I will arrange that the interview will take place in the dining room, and can easily

get you into the butler's room adjoining, where William sleeps; this room was arranged with a view to the overlooking of the dining room, and plate closet, as you discovered for yourself; from there you can both hear and see."

"So much the better." Then admiringly, he added, "Miss Wardour, you are a splendid ally; you have thought of every thing."

She laughed; then answered with a look of artful frankness: "I am trying to get back into my normal condition. I have been out of balance somehow, ever since this business commenced; have been as testy as an old woman of eighty. It is time I began to redeem myself. But I must not detain you. I see you begin to look uneasy. Until to-morrow, I commend you to the tender mercies of Simon and the cook."

"I wonder how that man looks, devoid of all disguise," mused she, after he had withdrawn. "I don't believe he is tow-headed and freckled by nature. I wonder what has become of poor Spill's letter; and if I had better ask his aid in finding it. But he is going away so soon. Now that I reflect, soberly, what may I be taking Doctor Heath possibly have for taking that letter? I think I must have been mad, or in hysteria. The man may be an imposter, a man of mystery, an all that; but why must I accuse him of taking a letter that could be of no possible use to him. I had worked myself into a rage. Well, it's done; I can't recall it. Doctor Heath will think me a villain, and why not? What is Doctor Heath's opinion of me?"

What indeed!

### CHAPTER IX.

The fates seemed propitious on Monday morning. The day dawned fair and balmy, and Constance arose, feeling refreshed and like her own scene self once more.

The events of the two previous days no longer seemed to her imagination a chaotic durling mass of tribulations; they had arranged themselves in their proper order, been reviewed sensibly, and assigned their rightful places, as things to be overcome, or overlooked, as the case might be.

Mrs. Alston, too, at once discreet and talkative, was in fine spirits, and the two, having ascertained the precise time when Private Detective Belknap might be expected to make his report, had breakfasted comfortably, stowed away Mr. Bathurst, according to previous arrangement, and were now calmly awaiting the coming man.

They had not long to wait. Mr. Belknap, ushered in by Nelly, found the ladies seated near the breakfast tray, as if just about completing a repast, which had in reality, been finished some time before.

"Good morning, ladies," said he, laying down his hat, and at once drawing a chair to the table, with the air of a man whose time is money. "Having completed my investigations here—that is, in this immediate neighborhood—I am prepared with my written report, which I submit to you, Miss Wardour. Will you please read it, and then give me further instructions," and he proffered her a neatly folded paper, of godly proportions.

Constance glanced at it dubiously, but did not take it from his hand.

"Please read it, Mr. Belknap," she said, appealingly. "I am sure I shall comprehend it better, and my aunt shares my anxiety to hear and understand its contents."

"As you please," assented he, opening the manuscript. "I have made it as brief as possible; of course, it was necessary to be statistical."

The report began with the usual form, day and date, circumstances under which his services were retained, etc., a statement of the case as it was made to him, then came the following:—

"Arrived in W— early on Sunday morning, walking from the first station northward. Found Wardour Place easily from Mr. Lamotte's description. Gained admittance, and was at once permitted to inspect the room where the robbers found an entrance; found that it had been previously examined, and could not feel quite sure that some clue had not been effaced or something disturbed that might have evolved a clue. Miss Wardour assures me that nothing of value was taken from this room, and I am inclined to think that the robbers had hoped to find themselves in the dining room, and gain access to the plate closet."

"Finding themselves instead in the library, a room where, there being no man of the house, it could hardly be supposed valuables were kept, or money or papers of worth locked away; they, after a vigorous search, opened the door of the hall; here they found themselves at once at the foot of the stairs and, naturally, one ascends to explore. The first door that he tries is the door of Miss Wardour's dressing room; and, having examined that door, I am compelled to think that Miss Wardour, for once, forgot to lock it. Had it been locked the explorer would naturally have passed on, trying the other doors and some of these doors were certainly not locked."

"The burglary was effected with the utmost quiet, and there are no indications that anything was disturbed on the second floor, save in Miss Wardour's rooms, therefore (I cite this presumptive evidence), that Miss Wardour's door was not locked as she supposed it to be; finding this to be the case the man signaled

to his confederate to come up, and then, having a dark lantern, they entered, and surveyed the room. The rest is evidence; one of them, skilled in his profession, and in the exigencies that must arise in the practice of it, administered to Miss Wardour the chloroform. Now the operation must have been a delicate one, and the length of time necessary to open the safe and get possession of its contents covered some minutes; having heard Miss Wardour's statement in regard to the effect a powerful dose of chloroform has on her hysterical system, I incline to the opinion that the drug was administered to her in minute doses, not once, but two or three times at least; this accounts for the bottle and the linen being left in the sleeping room. Probably, just at the moment when they had stowed away the rest of their booty, some slight sound alarmed them and they made a hurried escape, forgetting the bottle entirely."

"The robbers left behind them no clues beyond the established fact that they were professional burglars. This is proved by the manner in which they did their work, and by the tools they must have carried."

"I see plainly here the work of city-bred burglars, and the remainder of the work of finding them is to be done in the city, where they will eventually try to dispose of some of the jewels, no doubt."

"In order to satisfy myself that there has been no accomplice here, who may have been acquainted with the premises, I have searched most thoroughly, and I find nothing to indicate that there has been any one concerned in this affair, who is an inhabitant, or habitual visitor in the town."

"In a field to the northward, I have found what may be, I think, a trace of the robbers. Two or more men have leaped a ditch, running across the field from east to west; and the footmarks in the first instance are coming southward, or toward Wardour. These footmarks are within a few rods of the road, as if the parties had suddenly abandoned that highway, fearing observation from travelers. My supposition is, that they approached Wardour Place, keeping to the field, after having leaped the ditch, until the northern boundary of the orchard was reached; here they must have kept close under the wall, until they came to the roadside fence, which they climbed. The fence bears freshly scraped marks, as if made by boot heels in climbing over, and some tall weeds, growing by the roadside, give evidence of having been hastily and heavily trampled. The thieves probably returned after the robbery, in the same way; for, one crossing of the fence would not have left so many marks visible, either on the boards or among the weeds; and in the darkness they fell a little eastward of their first course; for I find, at the ditch again, but nearer to the river, the same footprints where the ditch has been leaped, this time the foot-steps going northward."

"It is probable that the thieves tramped northward under cover of the darkness, until they struck the railroad at some previously selected point, and from thence took the first train cityward."

The reading came thus abruptly to an end, and the reader looked up to note the effect upon his hearers. They both sat in most attentive attitudes, and each face wore an expression of puzzled astonishment. Not being able to reach their "inner consciousness," and read the mental comparisons there being drawn between this report and the very dissimilar summing up of the tramp detective, Mr. Belknap drew his inferences, as do we all, poor mortals that we are, seeing only the outside of the cup and platter. He saw the surprise, the puzzled look, that might denote a partial inability to grasp his thoughts and theories at once, and a feeling of satisfaction took possession of the breast of the astute detective.

Pausing for a comment, and receiving none, he said, with dignified gravity:—

"I trust that I have made my report sufficiently plain to you, ladies, and that you find no flaw in it."

Constance, who with her keen sense of the ridiculous, had been fancying the effect this report would have upon the detective in ambush, and struggling hard with her own resistibilities, mastered herself finally, and preserving her gravity of expression, replied with a wicked undercurrent of meaning:—

"It is quite plain to me, sir; I am a poor critic of such matters, but I should think it a masterpiece for directness and comprehensiveness."

"And you see nothing in the theory to object to? You think that working from these findings, there will be a hope of success?" he queried.

Constance hesitated once more to consider her answer and collect herself generally.

"Why, you know, Mr. Belknap," she said at last, and with charming ingenueness, "this is not a matter for my judgment; I rely upon you entirely; pray do not hesitate, but continue your investigations in whatever direction your judgment leads you. I wish Mr. Lamotte was here to confer with you; but, if he were here," and her face became sad as she thought of his home coming; "he would hardly be in spirits for such a consultation. Mr. Lamotte has had news awaiting him. We must venture this matter without his aid for the present."

The detective's face showed grave concern.

"Bad news for Mr. Lamotte," he murmured; "I deeply deplore that. He seems such a genial, kindly gentleman, so much above the average business man. It is not too serious, I hope."

"It is something you would have heard from the first gossip, if you had mingled with the town people at all," replied Constance sadly. "I may as well tell you what every one knows. Mr. Lamotte's only daughter has eloped during his absence, with a very worthless man."

(To be Continued.)

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