

# The Diamond Coterie

By LAWRENCE M. LYNCH

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(Continued.)

Constance laid down her book, and her face underwent a change. "It's any thing more than gossip, Auntie, tell me quick."

"Oh, it isn't gossip; at least they all say it's true. And as for gossip, Con, I tell you, you have done something toward stopping that."

Con laughed like one who is conscious of her power. "Yes, indeed," rattled on Mrs. Alliston. "Mrs. Wooster says, and if she is a Unitarian she is certainly a very good and truthful woman, that she has heard from various ones that you have openly declared against the handling of poor Sybil's name among the people who have called themselves her friend, and accepted so often her mother's hospitality. And she said—these are her very words, Con—'I was delighted, dear Mrs. Alliston, for we all know that those gossip lovers, every one of them, will deny themselves the luxury of tearing Sybil to pieces, knowing that she has a champion in Miss Wardour.' So much for influence, Con."

"Bah!" retorted Con, wise in her generation. "So much for money, and how do I know that I have not lost prestige along with my diamonds. Auntie, you have lost the thread of your discourse; you always do."

"So you always tell me," laughed the elderly chatterbox. "Well, Con, they say that Sybil has sacrificed herself."

"Do they?" said Con, sarcastically; "the wise heads. I hope that conclusion has not exhausted their keen intellects, whoever they may be. As if the sacrifice were not patent on the face of the thing."

"Con, you talk like a—stump orator." "Do I? Well, I'm glad of it; it would not be so bad to be a stump orator, or any other sort of male animal, for the older I grow the more I incline to the belief that women are fools. But go on, Auntie; I believe I get 'riled' every time I hear Sybil's name. What else do 'they' say?"

"You don't deserve to be told, you are so impatient; but I will tell you this once. I was about to add that it seems to be an accepted fact that Sybil sacrificed herself to save Evan from some sort of exposure and disgrace. And they say that some of those rough men in a saloon threw the thing in Evan's teeth, and that he replied in his odd way—"

"Yes, she did it for my sake, and now the first man of you that mentions my sister's name in my hearing will go under." You know they are afraid of Evan in his rages."

Constance opened her mouth impulsively, but she choked back the words that rushed forward for utterance, and closing her lips tightly, sat staring straight before her, a strange expression creeping into her face.

She seemed to hear anew Evan's words: "Do your part, I will do mine. I, Evan Lamotte, worthless, black sheep, sot; I will find a reason that will not be questioned, and that will spare Sybil."

And he had found a reason. The black sheep was offered up a sacrifice. Evan Lamotte had flung away his last rag of respectability for his sister's sake. Henceforth he would appear in the eyes of the people doubly blackened, doubly degraded, the destroyer of his sister's happiness, the blight upon her life, and yet, he was innocent of this; he was a martyr; he had never done well, the imbricate.

Constance was strangely moved by this self-sacrifice, coming from one who was so morally weak; if it had been Frank, but here her lip curled contemptuously; instinctively she knew that such self-sacrifice was not in Frank's nature, any more than was such self-abandonment to weakness. Constance began to wonder if Frank and his parents knew the truth. If they had permitted the weakest shoulders to bear the burden; or, if Evan had deceived them too, and then she murmured, almost in the language of the tramp detective:—"It's a thing for time to unravel. It's a play just begun. It's a hard, hard knot."

And, then and there, she took Sybil and Evan to her generous heart of hearts, and mentally resolved to be their champion and friend, to the uttermost, while she would judge their parents and their brother according as these dealt by the unfortunates.

whether the old gentleman shall go at once and see Sybil; whether they shall bring her back and swallow that Burrill; for, it seems he must be swallowed, and what society will think about it, are the questions that they are agitating. Mother says, that Sybil must and shall come back; father says he will go and see her; and Frank—"he broke off abruptly and bent down to look at his saddle girth."

"And Frank; what does he say, Evan?" "Frank is a fool," snapped Evan irreverently. "What he says is no matter; only, Conny, now is your time, if you will only have faith in what I say. You are out with your ponies; drive straight to Mapleton, and don't mention me. You will be admitted to mother. Father is there, and Frank; give them the least chance, and they will tell you about Sybil, and then you can manage the rest. Tell them to bring her back, even with that beastly incumbrance. They will listen to you; they won't to me. If you fall me here, then—"

"Then your sacrifice goes for nothing. Oh, Evan, did you think I would not understand that? You have wronged yourself for Sybil's sake. But you shall have a tithing of your reward. And, dear boy, you should not have done this thing; we might have found another way."

"Nonsense, Conny! It was the only way. And what is my life worth, or my reputation, either? It can't hurt a poor devil like me. Con, will you go?" "I will go straight to Mapleton, Evan. You shall see that I have faith in you. I will do just as you direct, and all will go well."

"Then I'm off. I stole Frank's horse. I must get him back to avoid a row. Thank you, Conny; you are a true friend."

"Good-bye, Evan. Come to me with all the news, or when you want help." "I won't forget," wheeled his horse about; then, in a choking voice, "God bless you, Conny," and a moment later, he was away down the road, galloping in a cloud of dust.

Constance followed in his wake, keeping her ponies at a sober pace. "I wonder how he found out these things. Poor boy!" she murmured, half aloud; "he is not one at their family councils; of that I am sure. His father has lost all patience with him; and yet, he knows all that is going on. I wonder how."

If Evan Lamotte had heard this query, and had chosen to answer it, he would have said: "I watch and I listen."

## CHAPTER XIII.

Miss Wardour, being Miss Wardour, was apt to succeed in most things, and it is fair to suppose that her visit to Mapleton, in the character of intercessor for the erring Sybil, was not a fruitless one. Certainly, it was not barren of results.

On the day following the call from Constance, Mrs. Lamotte came forth from her seclusion; her carriage bore her out from the gates of Mapleton, and straight to Wardour Place. Here she took up the heiress and Mrs. Alliston, and the three drove ostentatiously through the streets of W—, bowing smilingly here and there, as calm, serene, and elegant a trio, to all outward seeming, as ever passed before admiring eyes on velvet cushions.

This act informed W— that Mrs. Lamotte was once more visible, and "at home," and when a day or two later, Constance and her aunt, in splendid array, drove again into W—, calling here and there, and dropping upon each hearthstone a bit of manna for family digestion, the result was what they intended it should be.

"Have you heard the news?" asks Mrs. Hopkins, fashionable busybody, running in for an informal call on Mrs. O'Meara, who is warm-hearted and sensible, and who listens to the babblings of Mrs. Hopkins, with a patience and benignity worthy of a Spartan mother.

"No! Well, I am dying to tell it, then. Sybil Lamotte is coming back—actually coming back—and that man with her; and—won't it be queer? We shall have him in society, of course, for I am told, from the best of sources, that the Lamottes will accept him as Sybil's choice, and make the best of him."

"But we need not accept him, my dear," comments the Spartan mother, whose lawyer husband is rich and independent, and does not count fees. "As for Sybil, she was always a favorite with us; we shall be glad to have her back." "Yes, that's very well for you and Mr. O'Meara, who are very exclusive, and go out little, but we poor society people will have to submit to the powers that be. Constance Wardour, the Lamottes, the Vandycks, have led us as they would, and queer as it may seem, the Lamottes are backed up in this business of forcing John Burrill upon us, by Constance, on one hand, and the Vandycks, mother and son, on the other."

how Sybil, in some way, saved him from something, by marrying this man. I never could get the right end, or any end of that story, nor have I found any one who knows the plain facts. Well, Mrs. O'Meara, I must go; I have seven more calls to make, and I really have talked too long."

"She'll take him up fast enough," mused Mrs. O'Meara, in solitude. "That's the way of society; they can't oppose wealth and prestige, even when prestige and wealth command them to fellowship with a grizzly bear; rather they will whitewash their bear, and call him a thing of beauty, and laugh in their silken sleeves to see him dance."

It was quite true, that bombshell of Mrs. Hopkins—Sybil Lamotte was coming back. Mr. Lamotte went somewhere, nobody could name just the place, and returned, having done, nobody knew precisely what; and as the result of that journey, so said W—, Sybil and John Burrill were coming soon, to breast the waves of public opinion, and take up their abode in Mapleton.

When this fact became well established, tongues wagged briskly; some were sorry; some were glad; some eager for the advent of the ill-assorted pair.

The sorriest one of all was unhappy Ray Vandyck, who realized how hard a task would devolve upon him; and the gladdest of the glad was poor Evan, who celebrated his rejoicing with one of the wildest and most protracted of all his spears.

Constance had won Sybil's battle. In accordance with the hint given by Dr. Heath, Raymond Vandyck had called at Wardour Place, and the result of that call was patent to the eyes of all W—. Ray, the rejected, had gone over to the support of his lost love and taken his mother with him.

At last they came, after the nine days' talk had subsided, after W— had become accustomed to the idea, quiet, unostentatiously. Before their arrival had become known, they were established at Mapleton.

Everybody admitted that they displayed good taste and judgment in the manner of their home coming, but when, except in the case of this horrible choice of Sybil's, did not the Lamottes display good taste. People said "The Lamottes," without so much as recognizing the existence of poor Evan.

Meantime the days were numbering themselves. It was June when Sybil Lamotte fled away with her Bear. It is September before they return; during these three months Constance has heard from Detective Belknap. He is always afar off, always on the track of her robbers, and she reads his reports, honors his drafts for "expense money," and troubles her head no more about the "Wardour robbery" or the "Wardour diamonds."

Of Detective Bathurst there came never a word or sign, either to the heiress or to Doctor Heath.

But it is time to introduce our Bear. (To be Continued.)

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