

The Diamond Coterie

By LAWRENCE M. LYNCH

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(Continued)

CHAPTER XX.

"It is impossible, sir! utterly impossible! and, pardon me for saying it, most absurd! This matter has been dragged on too long already. And on such evidence I utterly refuse to follow up the case. You have done well, undoubtedly, but it was only at the urgent request of Mr. Lamotte that I have allowed it to continue, and now I wash my hands of the whole affair."

It is Constance Wardour who speaks, standing very straight and with head very firmly poised, and wearing upon her face what Mrs. Allston would have called her "obstinate look." Her words were addressed to a well-dressed, gentlemanly-looking personage, who is neither young nor yet middle-aged, and who might pass for a solicitor with a good run

of clients, or a bank cashier on special business. He is looking somewhat disconcerted just now, but recovers his composure almost as she ceases speaking.

"But, madam," he expostulates mildly, "this is unheard of, really. You employ me upon a case which, just now has reached a crisis, and when success seems almost certain you tell me to drop the case. I never like to drag forward my own personality, Miss Wardour, but really this is a blow aimed directly at my professional honor."

There is an ominous flash in the eye of the heiress, but her voice is smooth and tranquil, as she replies:—

"I am sorry if this should injure you, Mr. Belknap, but, pardon me, I scarcely see how it can; you, as I understand, are a 'private detective,' answerable to no one save yourself and the one employing you. I, as that one, pronounce myself as satisfied to drop the case. I decline to use the circumstantial evidence you have brought against a man who is above suspicion, in my mind, at least. Let the Wardour diamonds rest in oblivion. Mr. Belknap, I am ready to honor your draft for any sum that you may deem sufficient to compensate you for the trouble you have taken, as well as for the hurt done your professional pride."

Private Detective Belknap stood for a moment, pondering, then he lifted his head and said, with an air of injured virtue beautiful to contemplate:—

"Miss Wardour, of course there is no appeal from your decision. In my profession it often happens that we are compelled to unmask fraud and deceit in high places, and to wound the feelings of some we profoundly respect. While in your employ, I was bound to work for your interest; I owed a duty to you. Being dismissed from your service, I owe a duty still to society. As an officer of the law, it becomes my duty, being no longer under your commands, to make known to the proper authorities the facts in my possession. I do not know this Doctor Heath, consequently can have no object in hunting him down; but, believing him guilty, and holding the proof that I do, I must make known the truth, otherwise I should be compromising myself, and compounding a felony." Here Mr. Belknap took up his hat. "I will send in my statement of expenses, etc., to-morrow, Miss Wardour. This withdrawal of the case has been so sudden, so unexpected, that I am not prepared for a settlement of accounts." And Mr. Belknap turned slowly toward the door.

But the heiress stopped him by a gesture.

"Stay a moment, sir," she said, and the ominous gleam was intensified into a look of absolute hatred, for an instant. "I hope I do not quite understand your meaning. Did you intend to tell me that if I dismiss you from my service, you will still continue the search for my diamonds?"

"No, madam; I will simply place the facts I have gathered before the town authorities, and leave them to use the knowledge as they see fit. I then withdraw from the field, unless called upon as a witness, when, of course, I must do my duty."

Miss Wardour stood for some moments in silent thought, one foot tapping nervously the while, a sure sign of irritation with her. At last she said, slowly, and with an undertone of sarcasm, that she made a futile effort to conceal:—

"I think I comprehend you Mr. Belknap, and I withdraw my dismissal. You are still retained on the Wardour robbery case; I suppose, therefore, you are subject to my orders."

Mr. Belknap laid down his hat, and returned to his former position. Without a trace of triumph or satisfaction in his face or manner, he said:—

"I am subject to your commands, certainly, Miss Wardour; but I beg that you will not misapprehend me."

"Be easy on that point," interrupted Miss Wardour, somewhat impatiently.

"Now then, Mr. Belknap, I want a little time to consider this matter, and to consult with my aunt; also to see Mr. Lamotte. During this time I desire you to remain passive, to make no move in the matter; above all to mention your suspicions to no one. You can, of course, keep as close watch as you may please over Doctor Heath, but it must be done quietly, do you comprehend? You are to say nothing of this matter not even to Mr. Lamotte."

Once more the detective took up his hat.

"I comprehend," he said, gravely; "you shall be obeyed to the letter, Miss Wardour; for three days, then, my task

will be an easy one. On Friday morning I will call on you again."

"That is what I wish," she said; "I will have further instructions for you then."

With the bow of a courtier, the private detective withdrew from her presence, and for a moment the heiress stood as he had left her, gazing at the door through which he had disappeared, as if she were seeking to transfuse an enemy with the angry fire of her eyes. Then she struck her hands together fiercely, and began a rapid march to and fro across the room.

"Ah!" she ejaculated; "the sleek, smooth, oily-tongued wretch! To dare to come here and make terms with me; to fairly compel me to keep him in my service! and to bring such a charge against him. If he had an enemy, I should call it a wretched plot. But I'll not be outwitted by you, Mr. Belknap; I have three days' grace."

She continued to pace the room with much energy for a few moments, and then seating herself at a writing table, rapidly wrote as follows:—

"Neil Bathurst, Esq.,
No. — B — street,
N. Y.

"Dear Sir—If in your power, be in W— in two days, without fail. Danger menaces your friend, Dr. H—, and I only hold detective B— in my service to bridle his tongue. I fear a plot, and can only stay proceedings against the innocent by proclaiming the truth concerning my diamonds; acting under your advice, I will withhold my statement until you arrive."

"Hastily, etc.,
"CONSTANCE WARDOUR."

There was yet an hour before the departure of the eastern mail, and Constance sealed her letter, and dispatched it by a faithful messenger; this done, she pondered again.

The private detective had waited upon her that morning with a strange statement. For weeks he had been working out this strange case, guided by the fact that the chloroform administered to Constance was scientifically meted out. He had commenced a system of shadowing the various medical men in W—, without regard to their present or previous standing. Nothing could be found in the past or present of any to cause them to fall under suspicion, until he came to investigate Doctor Heath. Here what did he find? First, that his antecedents could be traced back only so far as his stay in W— had extended. Nothing could be found to prove that his career had been above reproach, previous to his sojourn here; hence, according to the reasoning of Mr. Belknap, it was fair to suppose that it had not been. "For," argued the astute private detective, "where there is secrecy, there is also room for suspicion."

And Constance felt a momentary sinking of the heart, when she recalled the words she had overheard, as they fell from the lips of Clifford Heath: "Here, I am Clifford Heath, from nowhere." Starting with a suspicion, the private detective had made rapid headway. He had ascertained beyond a doubt that Doctor Heath's expenses, taken all in all, were in excess of his professional income. He might have a private income, true; but this was not proven, and then there was a mystery that the accused had tried in vain to hide from the eyes of the hunters. There was a correspondence that was carried on with the utmost caution, letters received that had thrown him quite off his guard, that were destroyed as soon as read. Finally and lastly, there was a bottle broken into fragments and thrown to the dust heap; but, without doubt, the counterpart of the one found at Miss Wardour's bedside on the morning of the robbery; while, among some cast-off garments, had been found the half of a handkerchief, that matched precisely the one found over the face of the heiress. All these facts Mr. Belknap had laid before her with elaborate explanations, and "notes by the way," but instead of drawing from her the expected indignant demand for the instant arrest of the accused one, Miss Wardour had listened coldly, and with marked impatience, and had finally declared her decision not to move in the affair, nor to allow any one to act in her behalf.

As Constance reviewed the arguments of the detective, a new thought came to her. Doctor Heath, all unconscious of the danger menacing him, might in some way, do himself an injury, and add to the chain of circumstantial evidence that was lengthening for his overthrow. He must be warned.

This was a delicate task, and she hesitated a little over the manner of accomplishing it.

Finally, she seated herself once more at her desk and wrote another letter, or rather a note.

It contained only a few lines, and was addressed to, "Mr. Raymond Vandeyck."

Meanwhile, private detective Belknap was driving slowly in the light buggy, that had brought him to Wardour Place, toward the residence of Jasper Lamotte. His features wore a look of complacent self-satisfaction, and he hummed softly to himself, as he drove easily over the red and brown leaves that were beginning to flutter downward and carpet the highway.

Arriving at Mapleton; he drove leisurely up the avenue, and lifting his eyes toward the stately edifice crowning the hill, he saw, standing on the broad

piazza, and gazing directly toward him, a beautiful woman, clad in trailing silk, and wearing a shawl of richest crimson cashmere, draped about her head and shoulders; as he drew nearer, he was startled at the strange mingling of pallor and flame in her face; the temples were like blue veined ivory, and the slender hands, clasping the folds of crimson, seemed scarcely strong enough to retain their hold; but the lips and cheeks were a glowing crimson, and the eyes burned and glowed with a steady light.

"So," thought private detective Belknap, "I have not left all the beauty behind me, it seems. I suppose this is the daughter of mine host."

And so thinking, he reined in his horse upon the gravelled drive and, lifting up his hat, with elaborate courtesy, said:—

"I believe this is Mapleton."

The lovely brunette allowed the crimson shawl to drop from about her head as she came slowly down the steps, never once removing her dark searching eyes from his face.

"This is Mapleton, sir. May I ask if this is Mr. Belknap?"

Somewhat surprised, he answered in the affirmative.

"Mr. Belknap, the detective," she persisted, and then, seeing that he hesitated over his answer, she added, "I am Jasper Lamotte's daughter, and know that he expects you."

"I am the man Mr. Lamotte expects," he said, throwing down the reins and springing from the buggy. "Is Mr. Lamotte at home?"

"My father is in the library," she replied, coming still nearer him, "follow me, Mr. Belknap, I will send a servant to take your horse."

He followed her up the steps, and across the broad piazza; as they passed under the shadow of the arched doorway, she paused, looked about her, and then, drawing close to the detective and laying one hand lightly on his arm, she whispered:—

"Mr. Belknap, I have a word for your ear alone. Can you meet me to-night where we shall be secure from intrusion?"

Her burning eyes searched his face, and accustomed as he was to strange situations, Mr. Belknap was startled for a moment out of his self-possession.

"I have need of your professional services," she hurried on, "and they must be rendered very secretly. Will you hear what I have to say?"

The beautiful face was full of wild eagerness, and Mr. Belknap was not insensible to the piquancy of the situation. "I am yours to command, madam. Name the place and hour," he replied gallantly.

"Then meet me at the boat house, you can see it from here, to-night at nine. Be sure you are not followed, and—above all, do not mention to my father, or any one, this meeting of ours. You will be punctual?"

"As the hour itself."

"Thanks. Come in now, sir; I will send a servant to announce your arrival."

She threw open the door of the drawing room, motioned him to enter, inclined her head in a graceful adieu, and swept down the hall.

Two minutes later he stood in the library bowing before Jasper Lamotte and his son Frank.

"Ah, it's you, Belknap," said the elder Lamotte. "And what news?"

"Very little, sir."

"But," interrupted Frank, "surely you have fired your train?"

"Yes, and I have run against the worst impediment that ever comes in a detective's way."

"And what is that?"

"A woman."

CHAPTER XXI.

Doctor Heath stood at his office looking out upon the street, and whistling softly. Below and directly under his gaze, stood a fine bay horse, harnessed to a new light road wagon; and horse and owner were somewhat impatiently waiting the arrival of Ray Vandeyck, who was under engagement to drive with Doctor Heath, and pass his opinion on the "points" of the handsome bay, a recent purchase of the doctor's, who was a lover of a good horse and a fine dog, and was never without one or more specimens of each.

A quick step behind him caused him to bring his tune to an abrupt close, and he turned to see Ray, who had entered hurriedly, leaving the door ajar, and was busy breaking the seal of a small cream tinted envelope.

Clifford Heath favored him with a quizzical glance, and came away from the window.

"That's a dangerous looking document, Ray," laughed the doctor, throwing himself down in his own favorite chair with the air of a man resigned to anything.

"I've a shuddering horror of anything so small and delicately tinted. But read it, my boy; it's your fate to be persecuted, you are so amiable!"

Ray lost no time in opening and scanning the dainty note, and he now turned a perplexed face toward his friend.

"I'll be hanged if I can understand it," he said, flipping the note between his thumb and fingers.

"Of course you can't, it's having emanated from the brain of a woman. I only hope your inability to comprehend the incomprehensible is the worst feature in the case."

"But it isn't," protested Ray. "I must renounce my drive, and your charming society."

"Really! is she so imperative, and are you so much her bond slave?"

Ray laughed. "Imperative," he cried. "You need not have asked, had you known the name affixed to this missive, and you would obey it with as much alacrity as I shall. Listen, Heath: I can trust you with a secret, if this be one."

And, unfolding the note, he read:—

(To be Continued.)

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