

# The Diamond Coterie

By LAWRENCE M. LYNCH  
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Author of "A Woman's Crime," "John Arthur's Ward," "The Lost Witness," "A Slender Clue," "Dangerous Ground," "Against Odds," Etc., Etc.

(Continued)

"It's a very brief story," says Constance, smiling slightly, and then she narrates, in a somewhat hurried manner, as if she were weary of the subject, and wanted to have done with it, the events of the morning, omitting, however, to mention the finding of the chloroform vial, and the half square of cambric.

"Mr. Soames and the constable—and several more, were on the spot with great promptness," finished she, with a comical glance toward Mrs. Aliston.

"We overlooked their proceedings until we discovered that they would do no actual damage, but would leave everything exactly as they found it, and then—"

"Yes," interrupted Francis, with a queer smile upon his lips, "and then you found a more agreeable occupation."

"And then," continued Constance, as if she had not heard him, but returning his half-malicious look with interest, "Dr. Heath called, and I told him all about it. He is very clear headed and sensible, and I was sorry his time was so limited; he might have been of some assistance, and—"

"Too bad," again broke in young Lamotte, with something very like a sneer upon his handsome face. "Let me repair the damage. I'll tell him to call—"

"Oh, not at all, Frank; pardon my interruption," said the girl, turning her eyes full upon him with artful artlessness. "You are very good, but it's quite unnecessary. Dr. Heath promised to call again during the day or evening."

Frank Lamotte bit his lip, but kept silent; and the elder man came to the rescue.

He had been thinking, and without seeming to have noticed the little passage at arms, he arose and said: "Well, Constance, I don't see that talking will do much good just now; what the occasion demands is action. My first impulse was to telegraph at once for an officer from the city force, but, on reflection, I think it better not to use the telegraph. Our every movement may be closely noted, and to send a message would be to set some one watching for the arrival of a detective, and once his identity becomes known, farewell to his prospects of success. It will take a few hours longer to get him here, but I think I had better visit the city in person, lay the case before our man, and so enable him to enter the town prepared for his work, and able to maintain his incognito. I have business of my own in the city, and Mrs. Lamotte is anxious to do some shopping. Women are always anxious to shop, I believe. I will return home at once, and give her warning; it will look less like a business trip if she accompanies me. How does this plan suit you?"

"Any plan that brings us a competent officer as early as possible, will suit me," replied Constance. "It's very good of you to take all this trouble, Mr. Lamotte."

"Nothing of the sort," expostulated Mr. Lamotte, heartily. "I am always at the service of my daughter's dearest friend. By the by, Sybil is not yet aware of your loss. I did not enlighten her, for I knew she would insist upon coming with me, and that," smiling a little, "would have necessitated waiting for toilettes."

"And apropos of toilettes," cried his son, springing up. "There is more, she will want due warning, for nothing short of a full hour will she take. So, sir, let's take a look at Soames and Corliss, and hasten our departure."

"Right; quite right, Frank. I will appoint you as my representative in my absence. You are to execute any and all of Miss Wardour's commands."

"I am ready to do that at all times," replied the young man, with sudden gravity, and letting his dark eyes rest for a moment upon the face of the lady in question. And then, without waiting for an answering remark, he turned from the room, followed by his father and the two ladies.

They found Corliss making his final sprawl, and the entire committee of investigation ready with any quantity

of newly hatched theories, promising and improbable. Cutting short their eloquence, however, Mr. Lamotte recommended them to talk as little as possible among the townspeople, and to pursue the investigation quietly, after their own light. Then, after a few more words with the fair heiress, father and son took their leave.

Left alone, Constance sprang lightly out from the open library window, and began pacing the graveled walk, with a brow wrinkled in thought. Hearing a step behind her, she turned to encounter once more the gaze of Francis Lamotte.

"I beg your pardon," he said, quite humbly. "I was commissioned by Sybil to give you this," extending a dainty white note. "In the excitement of the morning I quite forgot it. Sybil gave me it last evening, asking me to deliver it this morning," and lowering his voice, "knowing it would be for me an exceedingly delightful mission."

Constance took the missive, and twisting it carelessly in her fingers, said:—

"Of course, Frank; many thanks. And now, as you are under my commands, I forbid any more flattery and nonsense, sir. I am not in the mood to retort."

"So much the better for me," muttered the young man, moodily. "Constance, I—"

"Silence, sir! Have you not received your orders? My mind is on my losses. If you can think of no way to further our search, I shall dismiss you."

"I have thought of a way, then," he replied, with a touch of dignity. "I think one point has been overlooked. Those robbers have undoubtedly fled the town with their treasure, but it is hardly likely that they went by any very public thoroughfare. Now one, two or more strangers, traveling across the country, may have been seen by some cottager, farmer, or wood cutter; and I think it would be a mistake to neglect what might give us a clue. Probably the rascals took to their heels during the hours of darkness, making for some small railroad station. Now, I propose to go straightway, mount my horse, and scour the country in search of information. If I find a clue I shall follow it up; and so, if you don't see me by to-morrow morning, Constance, you may know that I have struck the trail."

"Why, Frank," cried Constance, in a burst of outspoken admiration. "I didn't think it was in you! Really, I admire you immensely; and you will really abandon your ease and comfort for—"

"You."

"No, don't put it in that way; say for justice."

"I don't care a fig for justice!" impatiently. "My motive is purely selfish. If I can be instrumental in recovering your diamonds, may I not hope for some very small reward?"

"To be—sure, Frank. I had overlooked that; a reward of course. I mean to have posters out right away, and—you may as well earn it as any one."

Francis Lamotte turned swiftly and stood for a moment with bent, averted head; then turning once more toward her a set, white face, he said:—

"Even your cruelty shall not prevent me from serving you to the fullest extent of my power. And while I am gone you will receive—" he broke off abruptly, then went on, speaking huskily. "Constance, a girl like you can know little of the life led by a man who is an enigma even to his fellow men. I wish I could teach you to distrust—"

She lifted one hand, warningly. "You can teach me to distrust no one but yourself, Frank; and please don't perpetually talk of me as some unsophisticated school girl. I am twenty-one, nearly as old as you, my child—old enough, certainly, to form my own judgment of people and things. Don't let's quarrel, Frank; you know I have been taught self-reliance, and never submit to dictation."

"As the queen pleases," he lifted his hat with a graceful gesture. "Good morning, Constance," and he turned and strode rapidly away.

"Frank."

He stopped and turned toward her, but did not retrace his steps.

"Are you really going, a la Don Quixote?"

"I really am," gravely.

He lifted his hat once more, and without uttering a word, resumed his rapid walk down the graveled footpath. Reaching the entrance to the grounds he paused, leaning for a moment against a stone pillar of the gateway; his hands were clenched until the nails left deep indentations in the flesh; his face was ghastly and covered with great drops of perspiration, and, whether the look that shone from his glittering dark eyes betokened rage, or despair, or both, an observer could not have guessed.

Meanwhile Constance stood as he had left her, gazing after him with a mingled expression of annoyance and regret.

"It was very ungracious of me," she thought, half penitently, "but there's no other way with Frank, and his love-making annoys me exceedingly, especially since Aunt Honor's discovery. How she detests him, and Aunt Honor is too easy to lavish her hate upon many."

As if conjured up by her words, Mrs. Aliston appeared at the window.

"Handsome fellow, isn't he?" that is what her lips said, but the tone and look said quite as plainly, "detestable, abominable, odious." For Mrs. Aliston believed that she had discovered a good reason for disliking Frank Lamotte.

"Don't be expensating, Aunt Honor."

retorted Constance, re-entering the window with a slow languid movement, as if the events of the morning had wearied her vastly. "Everybody has outdone themselves in the disagreeable line, myself included. I wish the burglars had carried me off along with my jewels. I am going up-stairs and try another dose of burglarious chloroform. But, first," dropping into the nearest chair, and assuming a tragic tone, "Let me peruse the letter of my beloved Sybil."

She broke the seal of the dainty envelope, to find that it enclosed another and still smaller one; and on this she read:—

"Constance, if I did not trust you so fully, I would not dare risk this: Do not open this envelope until sunset of to-morrow (Saturday); the contents will enlighten you as to my reasons for this strangeness then."

There was no signature, but the handwriting of Sybil Lamotte was too familiar to be mistaken. And, Constance Wardour sat silent and motionless, gazing at the little envelope with such a look of intense gravity upon her face as had not rested there during the entire morning.

Mrs. Aliston, who was a woman of tact, and understood her niece thoroughly, seemed not to have noticed the unopened envelope, and asked for no news from Sybil.

Presently, Constance arose and, still wearing that weary air and solemn face, crossed the room; with her hand upon the door, she turned her face toward Mrs. Aliston, saying:—

"Auntie, you hear about all that's going; did you ever hear that there was a streak of insanity in the Lamotte blood?" And then, without waiting for the astonished lady to reply, she quietly passed out and up the broad stairs.

### CHAPTER IV.

It is almost sunset, and Constance Wardour is standing alone at her dressing-room window, which faces the west. It is still in confusion, but she cares little for that. Her thoughts are far away from the "Wardour diamonds" at this moment. Several things have occurred to vex and annoy her to-day, and Constance Wardour, heiress and autocrat, is not accustomed to being annoyed.

In fact, so peculiar is her nature, that very few things have power to annoy her; but, just now, she is annoyed because she is annoyed.

"As the queen pleases," Frank Lamotte had said; and all her fair twenty-one years of life events had been ordered "as the queen pleased." She had been taught self-reliance, so she told him; she had inherited self-reliance, she might have said, inherited it along with the rich, strong, fearless blood, the haughtiness, the independence, and the intolerance of the Wardours.

The haughtiness was only for those who presume; the intolerance for those she despised; and Miss Wardour was quite capable of that strong sentiment, or feeling. The independence was an ever present element of nature.

Of medium height, she was neither slender nor plump, graceful curves, perfect outlines, faultless gait and gesture; she, "slew her tens of thousands," and bore herself like a princess royal toward all.

Without being regularly beautiful, her face is very fair to see. Being, in spite of her haughtiness most kind and considerate toward inferiors and dependents, and withal exceedingly lovable, she is disqualified for a novel heroine by her excessive humanness; and, by that same humanness, eminently qualified to be loved by all who know her, gentle and simple.

Just now her firm little mouth is pursed up, and her brow is wrinkled into a frown, such as never is seen on the face of any orthodox heroine; but, her thoughts are very orthodox, as heroines go. She is wondering why Doctor Heath has not made his second appearance at Wardour Place, when she so plainly signified her desire to see him there again, and soon.

Not that she had bidden him come in so many words; but, had she not looked? had she not smiled? Nor that she felt any special interest in Dr. Heath; oh, not at all, only she was bored, and worried, and wanted to be amused, and entertained; and Clifford Heath could be entertaining.

Sybil Lamotte's unopened note lies on the dressing table. She has pondered over that half the afternoon, and has wondered, and guessed, at its meaning; turning over in her mind every explanation probable, and possible, but satisfied with none. She is wonderfully lacking in curiosity, for a woman, but for this she might not have withstood the temptation to anticipate the sunset; for she never has felt so curious about a mystery in her life.

She turns abruptly from the window, and her eyes fall upon Sybil's note, her thoughts return to it again. But it is not quite sunset.

Picking it up, she re-reads for the twentieth time the puzzling lines, then she throws it down impatiently.

"Bah!" she exclaims; "you wretched little white enigma! you are tempting me to forget myself. I shall flee from the fascination of your mysterious face, for I am quite certain that Joshua's chariot is abroad, and the sun is standing still in the skies."

So saying, she goes out, closing and locking the dressing-room door, and descends the stately stairs; at their foot she pauses in full view of the entrance, for there, hat in hand, appears the subject of her recent discontent, Doctor Heath. Surely there must be something depressing in the atmosphere, Constance thinks, as she goes forward to meet him; for his face wears a grave, troubled look not usually seen there.

(To be Continued.)

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