

The Diamond Coterie

By LAWRENCE M. LYNCH
(E. M. Van Deventer)

Author of "A Woman's Crime," "John Arthur's Work," "The Lost Witness," "A Slender Clue," "Dangerous Ground," "Against Odds," Etc., Etc.

(Continued.)

"Doctor Heath," she says, "was reproachfully, and fabricating after the manner of her sex, here I have been trying to evoke from my inner consciousness what manner of man your great detective might be. You barely introduced him, and then you flitted; and I do so much dislike the 'To be continued' style."

"So do I," he replies, soberly, as he follows her into the drawing room. "So much that I shall make the story I have come to tell, as brief as may be. Miss Wardour, have you heard any news from the town—since noon?"

"Not a word," moving across the room, and drawing back the curtain so that the last rays of sunlight fall across the floor. "Is there any news? Have they found a trace of my robbers?"

"For the time being, your robbers are forgotten," smilingly slightly. "—I have had a fresh sensation this afternoon."

"So! and I have become a lesser light? Well, so goes the world! Of course it won't be as interesting as the story of my own woes; but, who is the newest candidate for sensational honors?"

"Your friend, Miss Sybil Lamotte?"

Instantly her careless tone changes to one of gravity. For a moment she has forgotten Sybil, and her note; now she remembers both, and involuntarily glances out toward the west. The sun is almost gone, but still darts red gleams across the sky. Moving nearer she seats herself, and scans his face a moment, and then, while she motions him to a seat opposite her, says, in that low even tone that is usual to her in all serious moods.

"And what of Sybil Lamotte?" Her eyes search his face; instinctively she knows that something serious has happened; she resolves, yet, with her natural heavy, resolves to hear the worst at once.

"She has—eloped."

"Eloped! But why Sybil eloped—then it must be with Ray Vandeyck" drawing a breath of relief.

"No," gloomily. "It is not Raymond Vandeyck. That would have been simply a piece of romantic folly, since no one would long oppose Ray, but this—this thing that she has done, is worse than folly, it is crime, madness."

"Not Ray! and yet Sybil is—Doctor Heath tell the whole truth, a fine very worst, quickly."

"Sybil loved Raymond Vandeyck, that is what you were about to say, Miss Wardour. You would have betwined no secret; poor young Vandeyck honors me with his confidence. I left him, not half an hour ago, prostrate, half maddened with grief and rage; grief, when he thinks of Sybil lost to him, and fury when he thinks of the man—she has chosen. I never saw him; but if the public speaks truth, John Burrill is all that is vulgar and corrupt."

"John Burrill!" Constance springs to her feet with eyes flashing. "John Burrill! Why, he is a brute; mentally, morally, physically, abhorred. And you couple his name with that of Sybil Lamotte? Doctor Heath, this is an infamous trick. Some one has been to you. You have never seen him, you say; if you had could not have been duped. Evidently some one goes to know a notorious character in a town like this; from seeing him feeling intoxicated through our streets, from hearing of his most startling escapades; a common lounge, a drunkard, a man with a divorced wife in our very midst. Doctor Heath, how you are incapable of such a jest, but tell me who has caused you to believe a thing so shameful?"

"I thank you for your faith in me," he says, with the shadow of a smile upon his face. "The story is simple, indeed, but it is true. Sybil has eloped, and with John Burrill. Listen, before you remember."

This afternoon at two o'clock, John Burrill, with a swift horse and shining new carriage, drove boldly up to the side entrance of Mapleton Park. There, Sybil Lamotte was awaiting him; he handed her to his carriage and then drove ostentatiously, through the town taking the west road. It appears, that for several days, Burrill had been dropping hints in his sober moments, and boasting openly in his cups, of his coming marriage with one of the belles of W., and, last evening, he openly avowed that to-day, he should carry off Miss Sybil Lamotte, in spite of her high and mighty family, and in the face of all the town. Of course, no one who heard regarded these things, save as the boast of a half drunken braggart and liar. To-day, young Evans and his still wilder chum, encountered him just setting forth with his fine turnout and wonderfully gotten up. They jested on his fine appearance, and for once he evaded their questions, and seemed anxious to be rid of them. This piqued their curiosity, and, ripe for mischief, as usual, they resolved to follow him.

"They were mounted when they met him, having just ridden into town. They saw him stop at Mapleton and take up Miss Sybil, from there they followed them westward. Burrill drove at the height of his horse's speed, and the boys, who followed at a distance, arrived at Milton (you will see their policy in avoiding the railroad towns,) ten miles distance, to find that Burrill had changed horses there, and driven away, still westward, at the same breakneck speed. Burrill's horse was badly used up, short as the drive had been, and the man who took it in charge said that the fresh horse was bought there by him, Burrill, yesterday, and that he had heard the lady

complain that they 'could not go past enough.'"

He ceases, and his eyes rest anxiously on her face. She does not seem to have observed that he is not speaking. She has heard every word, and, somehow, the conviction has been growing even in advance of his story, that it is all true. This will explain Sybil's strange letter, and—what letter! what does it contain? She turns and gazes, as if fascinated, towards the west. There are no more golden gleams athwart the window, only a dull red flash upon the horizon. The sun, at last, has set.

At last! She turns, rises slowly and without once glancing toward him begins to pass the length of the room, and he sees that the queenly Miss Wardour is for once unnerved, is struggling for composure.

Finally she speaks, still keeping up her show of composure.

"Mr. Heath, I am bewildered. I am terrified!—She breaks off suddenly, as if to modify her speech. "This can be no common—elopement," she winces at the word. "Sybil is refined, honest, amiable-hearted, and she loves—another. There must be something yet to be understood, and," with a sudden start, she looks in her eyes, "perhaps this might have been prevented; perhaps I might have prevented it?" another break; then, "Doctor, it is just possible that I may find a clue to this strangeness. Will you pardon my absence for a short time, and await me here! This is a strange request, but—"

"Essentially of strange things," he interrupts, kindly, seeing her agitation.

"Oh, Miss Wardour, I am at your service this evening."

He crosses the room, seats himself at a table, and takes up a book; and Constance stands irresolute for a moment, then, without a word, hurries from the room.

Up the stairs she flies, hastily unlocks her dressing-room door, enters, and, in a moment, with a courage born of a nervous determination to know the worst at once, seizes the mysterious note and breaks the seal. A moment's hesitation, and then the page is opened, and the lines, only a few, dance before her eyes. She tries to steady her hand; she can not read them fast enough.

"Constance, dear Constance:—

"When you read this, you may have become already aware of the fate I have chosen for myself. I have no explanation to offer. Think of Beauty and the Beast; think of Titania's strange choice; think me mad. But oh, Constance, never-censure me; never think that all the happy days, when you have been my friend, I was not worthy that friendship. And, Con, don't let others say things too bitter about me. I am not dead to myself, and to you all, and for the dead, have we not charity only? Constance, I wish I were buried, too."

SYBIL.

"P.S.—Con, never let my relatives see this note. They will have enough to bear."

So runs the note.

Half an hour later, Constance Wardour comes quietly into the drawing-room. So quietly, that her approach is not observed by Dr. Heath, until her voice breaks the silence, and she starts from the reverie in which he has been indulging, to see her standing before him, with pale cheeks, and troubled, anxious eyes.

"Has my madness been quite un pardonable," she says, appealingly. "I have had no idea of the fight of time. I have been sitting up here," motioning toward the upper floor, "stunned, and yet trying to think I have gained a little self-possession, smiling slightly, as she sinks into a seat, "but not my senses. I thought myself equal to most emergencies, but this is more than an emergency—it is a mystery, a terror! For the first time in my life, I can't think, I can't reason. I don't know what to do!"

It is her turn to speak in riddles; his, not to comprehend. But, being a man, he closes his lips and waits.

"Something terrible has befallen Sybil Lamotte," she goes on, gradually regaining a measure of her natural tone and manner. "I need an adviser, or I had better say, a confidante, for it amounts to that. You know Sybil, and you know poor Ray. You are, I believe, a capital judge of human nature. This morning, just after you left, as you know, Mr. Lamotte and his son called here, and Frank put in my hand this note from Sybil." For the first time he

conveys the letter which she holds between her two hands. "For reasons stated on the outside of the envelope, which was enclosed in another, I did not break the seal until—now. It may seem like violating Sybil's confidence, but I feel justified in doing what I do, I have two to advise me, Honor being worse than myself in a crisis like this; and I believe that both Sybil and I can trust you. Dr. Heath, please read that letter."

He looks at it doubtfully, but does not take it from her extended hand.

"You are sure it is best?" hesitatingly.

"You wish it?"

"I wish it," with a touch of her natural imperiousness. "I believe it is best."

Silently he takes the letter from her hand, silently reads the lines upon the envelope, while she thinks how sensible he is not to have uttered some stereotyped phrase, expressive of his sense of the high honor she does him by giving him so much of her confidence.

Still in silence, he opens and reads the letter, then lays it down and thinks.

At last she grows impatient. "Well," she exclaims, "are you, too, stricken with something nameless?"

He leans toward her, his arm resting upon the table between them, his eyes fixed gravely upon her face.

"Miss Wardour, does your faith in your friend justify you in complying with her wishes?"

"Most assuredly," with a look of surprise.

"In spite of to-day's events?"

"In spite of any thing!"

He draws a long, sighing breath.

"Oh," he says, softly, "it would be worth something to possess your friendship. Now—do you really wish for my advice?"

"Have I not asked for it, or, rather, demanded it, like a true highwayman?"

"Then here is your case: You have a friend; you trust her fully; nothing can shake your faith in her. Suddenly, she does a thing, shocking, incomprehensible, and, in doing it, asks you not to question, for she can not explain; asks you to think of her kindly; to trust her still. Here is a test for your friendship. Others may pry, drag her name about, torture her with their curiosity; she has appealed to you. Respect her secret. Let her bury it if she will, and can; you can not help her. If she has become that bad man's wife, she is past human help. Undoubtedly there is a mystery here; undoubtedly she has acted under the control of some power outside herself; but she has taken the step, and—it is done!"

She draws a long, sighing breath.

"You are right," she says, wearily, "your wisdom is simple, but it is wisdom, and I thank you for it; but, oh! if they could be intercepted, if I could have known—have guessed."

He smiles oddly. "You do not consider," he says, "how cunningly their plans were laid; doubtless they have been waiting some such opportunity. At twelve o'clock, Mr. Lamotte and wife started for the city."

"In my service, alas!"

"At one, Frank Lamotte mounted his horse and rode eastward."

"Alas! also to serve me."

"At two o'clock, the coast was clear, and the flight commenced. When it became known, search was made for Evan, as the only member of the family within reach of a warning voice. They found him in a beer saloon, in a state of beastly intoxication."

"Oh!"

"Of course he was surrounded by a crowd, eager to see and to hear how he would receive the news; and the work of sobering him up was at once commenced. It took a long time to make him comprehend their meaning, but after a while the name of his sister, coupled with that of John Burrill, brought him staggering to his feet, and a few moments later, a plain statement of the facts, hurled faintly at him by one of the loungers, sobered him completely. In an instant he had laid his informant sprawling in the saloon sawdust. He declared it a calumny; as you did, and declared war upon the lot of them. Soon kinder hands rescued him from those tormentors, and men he could not doubt convince him of the truth of the unhappy affair. And then, any who saw would have pitied him. The boy is wild and bad, but he has a heart, and he loves his sister. Poor fellow! he is not all bad."

"Poor Evan!"

(To be Continued.)



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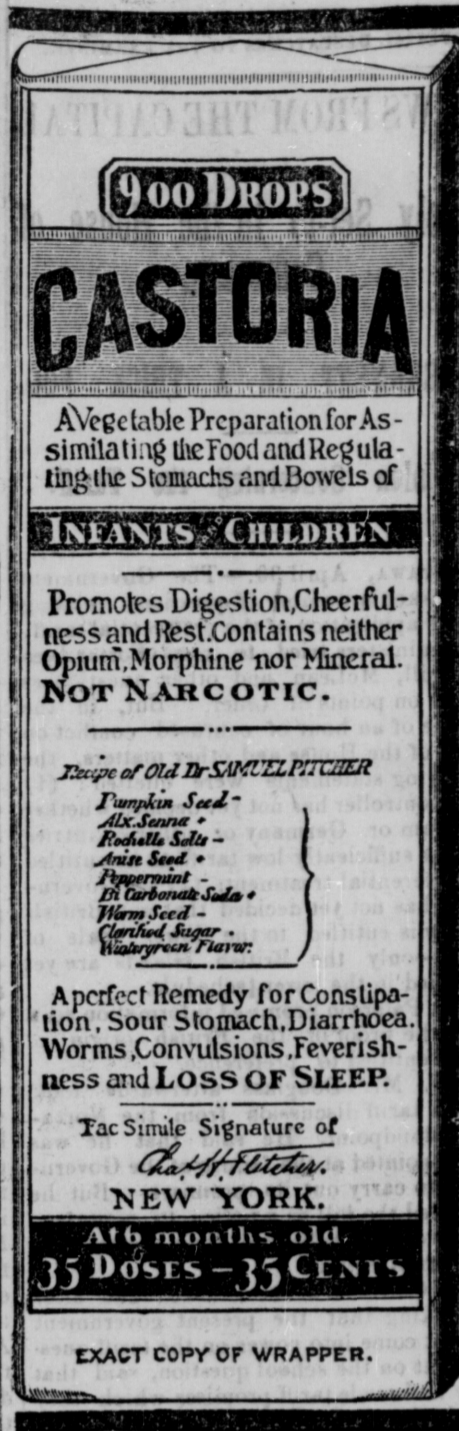
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