

The Diamond Coterie

By LAWRENCE M. LYNCH

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(Continued)

One day, while in conversation with Miss Wardour, I chanced to mention the name of Evan Lamotte, adding something not complimentary to that young gentleman. Miss Wardour took fire at once. She assured me that Evan Lamotte was not what people sought to make him; that in spite of his weaknesses, he had many noble and lovable qualities. She told me how he came to her when the first shock of his sister's flight was upon him; she described, vividly, his passion, his sorrow, his love for his sister. He spoke of her as the only being on earth whom he truly loved, the only one who had been unvaryingly kind to him. He cursed the destroyers of his sister's happiness, and implored Miss Wardour not to abandon that unfortunate sister. He said that he believed she would return, and he implored her to visit his parents, and intercede in behalf of the fugitive.

"Miss Wardour gave him the required promise, and then said that if the real reason for this strange elopement must remain a secret, she wished they could hit upon some explanation that would spare the fugitive as much as possible, and satisfy the gossips. Instantly he sprang up, declaring that he would furnish a reason, a reason that no one would question, and that would spare his sister.

"A few days later, the story was flying about W—, that to save her brother Evan from the consequences of some evil deed, Sybil Lamotte had sacrificed herself.

"When Miss Wardour heard of this she knew that Evan Lamotte had allowed himself to be defamed for his sister's sake. She knew that the true reasons for her friend's meanness were hidden safely beneath a brother's sacrifice.

"Miss Wardour told me this, and much more, in praise of Evan Lamotte; and here, for his sake, let me say, that in studying John Burrill and Francis Lamotte, I had discovered that Sybil Lamotte had been made to believe, that the honor and safety of her father and elder brother, depended upon her sacrifice, when the truth is, that she was sold. Simply sold—for their convenience, and their gain.

"You have looked upon Jasper Lamotte as an honorable citizen. On the day of John Burrill's funeral, I resumed my old disguise, that of Brooks, and went to Mapleton; I told Mr. Lamotte that I had come as a friend of his, and of Burrill's, to warn him, that if Nance Burrill was allowed to remain in W—, she would be brought forward at this trial, and give damaging evidence against his dead son-in-law.

"I remained in the library with him some fifteen minutes. My errand was a trap, and he fell into it. What followed, Mr. Belknap has already told. In the presence of this court, Jasper Lamotte has perjured himself. Let the officers of the law keep this fact in mind.

"Now, to return to my witness. When I heard Miss Wardour's glowing vindication of Evan Lamotte, I said to myself, 'Here is the right person. Evan Lamotte is the one who can clear up this mystery.' It was clear as day to my eyes.

"It was necessary that I should see him, but I very soon learned that he was lying at his home, dangerously ill, and quite out of his senses. There was nothing to do but to wait. I made the acquaintance of Doctor Benoit, and from him I obtained daily news of his patient.

"At the eleventh hour, when I had begun to despair of his recovery, the doctor reported the patient restored to his senses. I then told him, Doctor Benoit, that the very moment Evan Lamotte was able to listen, and to talk rationally, I must see him. That the case was one of life and death.

"This day, at the very hour when the trial was called, I set out for Mapleton; I saw Evan Lamotte. I told him that Clifford Heath was on trial for the murder of John Burrill; and that the chances were against him.

"It is not necessary to repeat all that passed between us, the result is, that Evan Lamotte comes into this court of his own free will and accord, and it is his desire that he be allowed to tell his own story.

"He comes here freely, willingly, asking nothing, hoping nothing, and when this audience has heard his testimony, they will join me in pronouncing him the noblest Lamotte of them all."

"There is a look so weird, so unearthly, in the eyes of Evan Lamotte, as he comes forward and turns his face slowly upon the audience, so that all can see its ghastly contrast with those burning orbs, that a startled hush falls upon them all, a funeral silence pervades the room.

"They seem to note for the first time, what a solemn thing is the oath, which Evan takes with voice, hollow and weak, but calm and full of decision.

"His breath comes in short gasps, his sentences are broken, the fatigue caused by his effort to speak is evident. But he goes on to the end, and this is what he says—

"When I learned that my sister's life had been ruined, I was a madman; I did not know for a time why she had thus thrown herself away, but I determined that I would know, and I set myself to spy upon my own family.

"If the detective had not told you this truth I should withhold it now, for we all have a sufficient burden of shame upon us.

"I watched and I listened and I learned why Sybil had been sacrificed.

and would make his me an uncomfortable as possible; I was a madman.

"Constance Wardour told me that was not the way to help Sybil; that such a course would only cause her added sorrow. When I grew calmer I saw that Conny was right. I promised her to do nothing that would add to my poor sister's unhappiness.

"By and by they came home, and I saw the misery in my sister's face; day by day it deepened, her eyes growing hollow and wild, and full of unutterable horror and fear, her face growing paler and thinner, and sadder, her hands so weak and tremulous, all appealed to me, all maddened me afresh. I resolved that in some way I would free her. But how?

"Day after day I brooded upon it. Burrill became more bestial, more besotted, more contemptible, every day. My sister's strength was almost gone, her reason was tottering.

"I began to cultivate Burrill. I flattered so low myself that he could feel at ease with me. But drunk or sober I never once forgot a resolve I had taken. Matters were going from bad to worse. It must be Sybil's life or his. I resolved that it should not be my sister who was sacrificed.

"When I found that no more time could be wasted, I laid my plans. I feigned illness and kept my room for several days.

"Burrill came daily to see me. I told him that I had some rare new fun in my head, and we planned that I should feign to be worse than usual. Burrill knew that our people had made efforts to stop our nocturnal expeditions, and he agreed with me that the thing should be kept secret. On the last night he left the house early, saying that he would spend a couple of hours at 'Old Forty's,' and then meet me at a place appointed.

"At nine o'clock I stole out, and no one at Mapleton discovered my absence. I did not intend that they should. I waited at the place appointed for my meeting until I grew impatient. The time came for him to appear; he did not come. I knew where I should find him, and set out for 'Forty Rods.' I was determined to let that night end Sybil's troubles.

"Half way between the saloon and Doctor Heath's I saw him. He passed close to me, as I came up from Mill avenue, and reeled across the road. He was not going toward our rendezvous, but away from it.

"I followed stealthily. I did not make my nearness known. I think he was too drunk to know where he was going or where to stop. He reeled past Doctor Heath's house, and was nearly opposite the gate of the empty lot before he discovered that he had gone too far.

"He turned, and while he leaned against the fence and seemed to ponder, I crept upon him, knife in hand; I struck him, once, again, a third time. He uttered one groan loud enough to have been heard some distance away, and then fell heavily. I had struck home. When I was sure that he was dead—I seemed to know just how to act—I ran to the gate of the Burns' lot and opened it wide. The body was twice my weight but I dragged it inside before my strength gave out.

"Then, for a while, I seemed panic stricken. What should I do with that body? By and by, I thought of a way to get help. I waited until midnight, then I made my way to Mapleton, all blood stained, and carrying the knife with me. Unseen I entered and gained Frank's room. He was up and pacing the floor; I told him to follow me. We saw my blood-stained hands and garments; I opened my coat and displayed the knife, and he obeyed me. I told him what I had done, and that he must help me conceal the body. For a moment he seemed stunned, and then he assisted me with surprising readiness; he planned everything; in fact, took the lead from that moment. I thought he was working to save his brother. The detective has told me the truth, and absolved me to tell all I know.

"Frank left me at the foot of the stairs leading to Heath's office. When he came down he seemed much excited, and hurried on very fast. We scooped out a grave in the cellar, as best we could in the dark, Frank working actively. He told me to take my knife and throw it into the old well—if you look you will find it there. While I was doing it, he must have put the other knife in the grave. When I came back he had covered the face with something white. I did not think about it at the time; now I know that it was Doctor Heath's handkerchief.

"Doctor Heath is an innocent man. I killed John Burrill; I am here to accept the consequences. I did the deed to save my sister. I do not regret it."

"Then, turning toward the place where Frank Lamotte sits, cowering and panic stricken, he stretches out one spectral hand and says—

"Frank! Frank Lamotte, do the only thing left you to do; stand up and say that I have spoken the truth. Let us end this at once, Frank!"

"Like one roused from some strange stupor, Frank staggers to his feet.

"It is all true!" he gasps. "Evan has told nothing but the truth." Then he falls back in his seat more dead than alive.

To describe the triumph of O'Meara; the mingled pity and gladness that fills the heart of Constance; the rejoicings of Clifford Heath's friends, one and all; the misery and the shame that overwhelmed the Lamottes, would be to repeat

The excitement of the audience, judge and jury, can be imagined better than described.

The tragic farce is at an end. The case is given to the jury. Without quitting their places, they return their verdict. Clifford Heath is not guilty; is honorably acquitted.

Exhausted by his recent effort, Evan Lamotte is carried from the court room, closely attended by his mother; is carried to the cell where lately Clifford Heath has dwelt a prisoner, while the latter is escorted in triumph, to O'Meara's, by all his rejoicing friends.

As the procession of conquerors moves away from the entrance, an officer approaches Jasper Lamotte.

"Mr. Lamotte, I am very sorry, sir, but you must consider yourself my prisoner."

Jasper Lamotte bows coldly, and signals the man that he will follow him.

The officer turns to Frank, but before he can open his lips, the miserable young man steps back, makes one quick movement; there is a flash, a loud report, and Frank Lamotte falls forward, to be caught in the arms of a by-stander.

They lay him gently down, and Jasper Lamotte bids them send for a physician; there must be one very near.

But Frank beckons his father to come close, and when the others have drawn back, this is what the father hears, from the son's lips—

"There is another—pistol in my pocket—I meant it for Evan—you—had better—use it."

Horrible words from the lips of a dying son. They are his last. Before Doctor Benoit can turn back and reach his side, Frank Lamotte has finished his career of folly, and sin, and shame, dying as he had lived, selfishly, like a coward.

CHAPTER XLIV.

"I never before in all my career, brought to justice a criminal whom I both pitied unreservedly, and justified fully. Viewing all things from his standpoint, Evan Lamotte is less a murderer than a martyr."

It is the day after the trial with so strange an ending. They are seated in O'Meara's library; Constance, Mrs. Allison, Mrs. O'Meara, Sir Clifford, his brother, the Honorable George Heathercliffe, Ray Vandyck, O'Meara, and Mr. Bathurst. Mr. Bathurst, who now appears what he is; a handsome gentleman, about thirty years of age, clever, vivacious, eminently agreeable. Mr. Wedron, like Brooks, has served out his day, and been set aside.

They have assembled at the detective's request, and while fully expecting a revelation of some sort, they look a serene, and not an apprehensive party.

"Poor Evan," sighs Constance; "I pity him most sincerely; I shall go and see him."

"We will go and see him," corrects Sir Clifford, and she smiles, and does not dispute the correction.

"Before I begin my other story," says the detective, "I may as well tell you of my visit yesterday, and how my news was received."

"From the moment when I heard Miss Wardour's description of Evan Lamotte, I knew he was our man. But I was determined to have no more mistakes. So I kept my opinion to myself. You can imagine how anxiously I hung upon the words of Doctor Benoit, knowing that upon this boy's chances for life hung Sir Clifford's life, liberty, and honor.

"When I saw that poor, pale, wreck of humanity, my heart almost failed me. How could I drag his secret from him? But no time was to be lost, and, as best I could I told him everything. First, that his sister believed herself the guilty one; guilty, at least, in that she had instigated the deed, and next, that Sir Clifford was now the victim of this crime. His mind at once seemed to grasp the issue. He had listened to me intently, breathlessly almost; he now lifted himself suddenly from the bed, and said quickly—

"Why, then, it seems I have not saved Sybil yet. Call my mother! let me see her alone."

"I obeyed him without a question; they were alone together for a long half hour, then Mrs. Lamotte came to me with the same look upon her face that you saw in court.

"Evan tells me that you know everything," she said, her voice trembling in spite of herself. "He tells me that you are a detective. Then you know that I have one son of whom I may be proud. Evan Lamotte has saved his sister's honor. Saved it doubly. My weak, my ill-used Evan, has proven the only man with a man's pride, who bears the name of Lamotte, because he could not see his sister and his mother contaminated by the presence of the monster his father and brother had been so base as to force upon us; he has taken justice into his own hands. He has freed his sister; he has saved her from crime, and now he stands ready to put himself in the place of a wronged and innocent man. I shall go with him into court; I shall not leave him again."

"She broke off with a dry sob and turned away to prepare for the drive.

"How I pitied that proud woman. How tender she was of her lost boy, and how he clung to her.

"Mr. O'Meara," turning suddenly toward the lawyer, "we must get that poor fellow out of that cell. Doctor Benoit says that he can live but a short time at best. He must not die there, and justice can not deal with a dying man."

"I think it can be managed," replied the lawyer. "All W— will favor the scheme. Not a man or woman will raise their voice against that dying boy. He will have plenty of friends now."

"He shall find them strong friends, too," exclaimed Constance. "Mrs. O'Meara, we will stir up the whole town."

"Then you'll get your way," put in Bathurst. "And now, Miss Wardour, are you ready to hear the end of the mystery surrounding the Wardour robbery, and the Wardour diamonds?"

All eyes were turned at once upon the speaker.

"Because I have asked you all to meet me here to-day that I might tell it," he went on. "It will contain much that is new to you all, and it will interest you

all. I know Miss Wardour will wish you all to hear the end of her diamond case, and the fate of her robbers."

"Of course! You are perfectly right, Mr. Bathurst," said Constance. "Doctor Heath cuts more of a figure than he knows in this business, and Ray has staid out in the cold long enough. Go on; Mr. Bathurst, expose me in all my iniquity. But have you really found the robbers?"

"Listen," said the detective, and while they all fixed upon him their gravest attention he began.

CHAPTER XLV.

"For several years past," began Mr. Bathurst, "the city and many of the wealthier suburban towns have been undergoing a systematic overhauling. Through the network of big thefts, and little thefts, petit larcenies and bank robberies, there has run one clear-cut burglarious specialty—a style of depredations noticeably similar in ease after case; alike in design and execution," and always baffling to the officers.

"I allude to a series of robberies of jewelry and plate, a succession of provoking thefts, monstrous enough to be easily traced, but executed with such exceeding finesse that in no single instance has the property been recovered, or the robbers run to earth.

"These fastidious thieves never took money in large amounts, only took plate when it was of the purest metal and least cumbersome sort; and always aimed for the brightest, the purest, the costliest diamonds. Diamonds indeed seemed their specialty.

"This gang has operated in such a gingerly, gentlemanly, mysterious manner, and has raided for diamonds so long and so successfully, that they have come to be called, among New York detectives, The Diamond Coterie, although no man knew whether they numbered two, or twenty.

"They could always recognize their handiwork, however, and whenever the news came that some lady in the city, or suburbs, has lost her diamonds, and that the thieves had made a 'clean job' of it, the officers said, 'that's the work of the Diamond Coterie.'"

"I have been much abroad of late, but every time I came back to New York the Coterie had gathered fresh jewels into its treasure box, and no man had found a clue to the sly fellows.

"I began to feel interested in the clique and resolved to take a hand at them, at the first opportunity. That opportunity came, with the news of the great Wardour robbery, and I came down to W—.

"I saw enough in this robbery to interest me, for various reasons.

"I believed I could see distinctly the handiwork of the Diamond-Coterie, and I saw another thing; it was the first piece of work I had known them to bungle. And they had bungled in this.

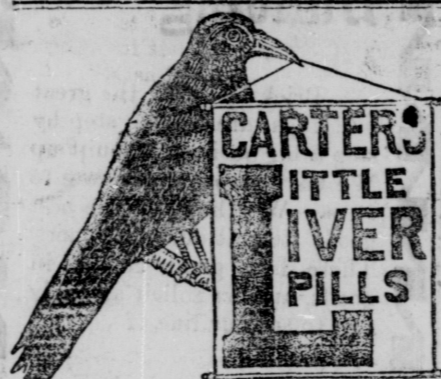
"I made some of my conclusions known to Miss Wardour and her friends, but I kept to myself the most important ones.

"The story of the chloroform, so carefully administered, was one of the things over which I pondered much; I borrowed the chloroform bottle and the piece of linen that had been used to apply the drug, and that night I accepted the hospitality proffered me by Sir Clifford. I took a wax impression of the vial, at his house, and I made an important discovery while there.

"Sir Clifford found me half famished and ordered his housekeeper to bring in a lunch. Not wishing my identity known, I pretended to be a patient, and just as my host was leaving the room, he tossed me a handkerchief, which he took from a side table, bidding me make myself a bandage to partially conceal my face.

"Now my eyes are trained to see much at a glance, and the moment they fell upon that bit of white linen they were riveted there.

(To be Continued.)



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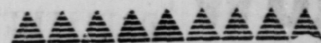
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