

# The Diamond Coterie

By LAWRENCE M. LYNCH

(E. M. Van Deventer)

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

(Continued.)

"Let me finish," he interposes. "Let me tell you just how I happened to drop down among you to-night. Recently we have had in the city several robberies similar to this of yours, Miss Wardour, as I understand it. Several times we have had a trace or clue, and have hoped to find the robbers, but so far have been baffled. We must necessarily have many ways of gathering up information, and I have some methods of my own. This is one of them. I have access to the offices of our daily papers. I have a friend or tool in each. When a special telegram, in the line of criminal intelligence, comes to one of these papers, I am in possession of its contents before it has reached the compositor's hands. This morning a special arrived at the office of the Evening Bulletin. I have not with me a copy. It ran:—

"MONSTER DIAMOND ROBBERY. (Special dispatch to the Evening Bulletin.)

"Intelligence has this moment been received, that Wardour Place has been burglarized; and the splendid Wardour diamonds, valued at more than one hundred thousand dollars, stolen, besides money and papers of value. No particulars as yet."

"This is what brought me here. I came to see if this burglary was the handiwork of the thieves I have been trying to catch. I came solely on my own responsibility, not intending to make myself known to the inmates of this house, but to ferret out things quiet and go my way. While lurking in that tree I was surprised to hear myself made the subject of conversation; and then, impulse led me to respond to this lady's expressed desire to see me, and—I presented myself."

All sit silent, all are astonished, and inclined to think this odd complication out quietly.

Constance is the first to see the absurdity of the situation, and she breaks into a peal of laughter, in which she is presently joined by the others. Finally, she regains her composure and says:—

"And so after all you are not our detective. Well, that shall not prevent us from appropriating your services. And you want to identify these robbers if possible? We are all at your disposal—tell us how we can help you most."

"You came with scant information," says Doctor Heath, "and you can't have been here long, but I'll wager you have picked up something."

"As to that," replies the detective, smiling slightly, "I left the city by the early afternoon express, before your Mr. Lamotte had arrived, you see. Twelve miles from W— I left the train and boarded a freight; about three miles out I abandoned the freight, quite unceremoniously, while she was pulling up a heavy grade, and tramped into town. I lounged about, confining myself to the more obscure streets until I had got the story of the robbery, with full particulars, as far as the gossips knew it. Toward sundown I started in this direction. Stopping on the way, I begged a drink of water and a slice of bread, of an old woman, in a little brown house. She thought me a very well behaved tramp, and inquired after my private history and the condition of my soul."

Constance laughs.

"That is old Mrs. Malloy," she says. "She's very pious and very full of gossip."

"Precisely!" replies the detective, wickedly; "she told me how many lovers you had, Miss Wardour; and how many dresses; and just the color of your eyes, and hair; she told me all about the robbery, and a great many more things that were not quite to the point."

"Of course," assents Miss Wardour, not at all abashed. "Mrs. Malloy is an oracle."

"As soon as I could make my escape from her I came nearer Wardour Place, and made circuitous survey. Still later, I came upon your gardener, sitting, ruminating, upon a stone fence, in the rear of the premises. I found him inclined to be communicative, in fact, he seemed rather desirous to air his notions, and he has some peculiar ones, concerning the robbery. I gave him a drink out of my black bottle, and he grew quite eloquent."

"Oh, dear," interrupts Constance once more. "Then, no doubt, he has pruned away half the garden shrubs. Old Jerry always is seized with a desire to prune things, the moment he has taken a drink."

"It was getting too dark for pruning, Miss Wardour, and he went to his supper. Then I approached the kitchen cautiously, found a comfortable lurking place, close to an open window, and listened to the table talk of the servants. From them I learned the bearings of the library, and so, while you were at dinner, I entered, without difficulty, and have explored that room to my entire satisfaction."

Amazement sits on the face of all three listeners.

"Well!" ejaculates Dr. Heath, "You are a modest tramp! What did you do next?"

"Next I prowled round and round the house, examining all the windows, and drawing some conclusions; and then, having seen you, Doctor Heath, through the drawing-room windows, I established myself in yonder tree to wait until you should go home, and to waylay you."

"I knew it to be the library window, and they wished to cross the library because they knew that from the door of that room they stepped at once upon the stairs, thus having the nearest, easiest and safest route to Miss Wardour's rooms. Either they found her door unlocked, or they were prepared with skeleton keys. Was the door locked, Miss Wardour?"

"It was locked. They then used a skeleton key, entered, and knowing just the proportion of chloroform Miss Wardour could bear, they administered it carefully, secured the booty without further trouble, and made their escape without detection."

No remarks from his listeners. They sit amazed, incredulous, admiring, yet speechless.

"Now, I see I had better prove my statements," goes on Mr. Bathurst, looking from one to another with a smile of easy superiority. "Miss Wardour is beginning to think that I do belong to the godmother species, and yet, it's all very simple."

"No doubt," retorts Doctor Heath, drily; "yet we are willing to endure your simple explanation."

"I say the robbers came by the river," continues the detective. "Before sundown I sauntered along the river bank; tomorrow I can show you traces, indistinct but sufficient, to prove that a boat has been drawn out of the water, and overturned upon the grass; keel, prow and oar-locks have left their traces. There is also the print of a clubbed and muffled oar, above the water mark, where an impatient hand has pushed off the boat. Here is blunder number one. All these traces might have been avoided or obliterated."

He pauses a moment, but his listeners sit, a very respectful audience, and are inclined neither to question or argue. So he continues:—

"I said that the robbers entered purposely at that particular window, and because they were familiar with the interior of the house. Now I have examined all of the windows of this floor, and I find that a person unfamiliar with the inside of the building, and not aware which of the upper rooms were occupied, would have chosen differently."

The dining-room windows, from without, would seem much more inviting; still more, the drawing-room windows. Naturally, our burglars would select a window which was tolerably easy of access, and where they knew there was the least chance of being overheard and observed from above. Now, the dining-room windows are close to the ground, and the awnings cut off all chance for observation from above; but—they knew that Miss Wardour's coachman sleeps in a small room just in the rear of the dining-room."

This was too much for Mrs. Aliston. "Now, how did you find that out?" she asks, with staring eyes.

"From my friend, the gardener," he replies. "Oh, I am quite familiar with things about here. The very best place for a burglar to operate would be these windows," motioning toward the front of the drawing room; "he could stand in comfort on the lower balcony, screened by the upper, and out away at shutters and panes; but, our burglars knew that Miss Wardour's rooms were directly above, and that Miss Wardour is a light sleeper. Now, the very place that would be shunned by an unfamiliar robber, is this very library window; it is higher than the others, has a little thicket of shrubs just beneath it, and is overlooked from above, being near an angle, by six windows. But our burglars knew that not one of these rooms to which the six windows belong, are occupied; and that the servants all sleep on the opposite side of the house. Now, then, I say that the robbers knew Miss Wardour's sensitiveness to the effects of chloroform; how else can you account for the fact of their giving just enough to cause her to sleep, and not enough to cause any unpleasant after effects. We can call it a coincidence, but it is one not likely to happen; Doctor Heath knows that."

"True," responds Doctor Heath; "in a matter of this sort one would hardly be likely to make so fortunate a blunder, or guess."

The detective pauses a moment, and then concludes: "My reasons for saying that the robbers entered the garden by leaping the low fence just below the gate, are, first, that gate creaks loudly when opened or shut, and they knew this, and therefore avoided it; and, second, one of them, the heavier of the two, came over with sufficient force to leave the imprint of his right boot heel in the ground. It was the right heel, because the deepest side of the indentation is to the right, and he would naturally strike the ground with the weight resting on the outside of the foot; and here, my friends, as the lawyers have it, I rest my case."

"And a very clear case it looks," says Doctor Heath.

"How easily and naturally you come at these things," exclaims Constance, in admiration. "It is a, b, c, to you, but it's awful Greek to the rest of us. I begin to think detectives are born, not made."

"You think right, Miss Wardour," replies Bathurst. "It is the made detectives who spoil and disgrace our profession."

"But," says Constance, with a look of anxiety upon her face; "I am sorry to have it proved that this thing was done by some of our people. I am reluctant to institute a search that may implicate some poor man whose wife and children may live in our very town."

The detective laughs softly.

"There it is," he exclaims. "An amateur must always judge by what appears uppermost. We detectives, as a rule, always distrust the most plausible theory. Now look, a skilled burglar is a man of many resources; a burglar studies his business as I study mine. You have no idea how much misapplied talent goes roaming about of nights with a jimmy and a dark lantern. Now let us suppose this case. A professional burglar in the course of his wanderings, hears, as would be quite natural, of the immense value of the Wardour diamonds, and he desires to possess them. Now it's a great prize, and he goes to work with his utmost care. He has confederates; they come, one or all, and manage to gain the necessary information: they may come as tramps,

peddlars, what not; a talkative servant, a gossiping neighbor, like Mrs. Malloy, or fragments of information picked up here and there may help them to get the lay of the land; they may even have entered the house, probably have, and it may have been last month, or last year; our burglar nourishes his job and studies it carefully. Finally he is ready; he strikes; he succeeds. I do not say this is the case, understand; I simply put it as a thing possible; and quite as probable as that the thieves are here in W—."

Constance muses; she is thinking of various other deceptions committed in and about W—; and, as once before she recounted them to Doctor Heath, she enumerates them now, and closes by saying:—

"Your burglars keep a sharp eye on us, at all events, Mr. Bathurst."

"Naturally," assents the detective; "W— is a capital field for that sort of chap. It's a mine of itself, and I will always receive due attention from the law breakers. By the by, Miss Wardour, these facts you mention are worth noting; after considering, I think I will remain in W— during to-morrow. I want to explore about the river, and about this place, a little more. If I may see you to-morrow I would like your version of these other older robberies. I keep a record of every crime reported, and, no doubt, have each of these upon my register, but not as I would receive them from you. I do not wish to be seen or known, as acting in this matter; your friend will be here to-morrow, or Monday, and the officer he has chosen should be on the ground before to-morrow morning. No doubt he will be all that you wish for, and my duties will call me elsewhere very soon."

Then they all rise, and standing in a group begin talking. They so much regret that they can not retain his services, and they are very grateful to him for so much light as he has thrown upon the subject of the robbery.

"But wait," he says, "you are to bear in mind that you have no light; you are in total darkness and ignorance; to-morrow you will have a new officer, he may evolve a totally different theory. Then discard mine, or not, as you think fit; in any case, let it be kept exclusively to your three selves, for I am very likely to make a second appearance here. I think that these burglars of yours are the chaps I am wanting. And, Miss Wardour, this reminds me," drawing from his pocket the chloroform vial wrapped in its accompanying linen bit, "may I keep this until morning? I will return it to you by Doctor Heath, and, if your officer is not too much in the way, will try and see you in person, if you will kindly give me what facts you can recall concerning those robberies."

Constance expresses a hope that the officer will not be in the way, and after they have talked a little more, the detective repeating his cautions, Constance repeating her regret that he is not to take the case, as her case; and Mrs. Aliston repeating everything that comes into her head, they separate, and the two men, looking so oddly unlike, go out into the night.

Mrs. Aliston is ready to talk, but Constance is in no mood to listen. She cuts her aunt's elocution, and goes with listless weariness to her own apartments.

Since the appearance of the detective, a shade of perplexity rested on her face, and over and over again her thoughts have repeated the question which now falls from her lips.

"What does it mean? I am not mistaken; he said, 'here, I am Doctor Heath from nowhere.' I begin to think that life is a mystery." For Miss Wardour, hesitating a moment as she passed in from the balcony, had caught the words uttered for the ears of the detective only.

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