

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)

"Miss Wardour—By all means keep the secret of the diamonds, and trust all to me. I think it best not to come to you, as Belknap keeps a constant watch upon your movements; dismiss him as soon as you like. Have no fears regarding Heath. I have his enemies well roped; be assured that I shall be on hand when needed, and when you see me expect to have the question of the diamond robbery forever set at rest. If you have anything to say, send verbal instructions by boy; he is to be trusted. Yours sincerely,

"NEIL J. BATHURST."

Constance heaved a sigh of relief, as she finished the perusal of this note, and after a moment's reflection, she said:— "Tell Mr. Bathurst that I will obey his instructions, and that Mr. Belknap will be dismissed from my service to-day."

"Yes, madam. Now if you will please to select some of these things for the sake of appearance."

"Of course. You are very thoughtful. Are you a young detective too?"

The boy looked up with a gleam of pride in his eyes.

"I have been in Mr. Bathurst's service two years, madam."

"Oh, then I have no fears as to your discretion; so I will ask you a question, knowing that you are wise enough to refuse me an answer if I am asking too much."

The boy smiled, and stood attentive.

"May I ask if Mr. Bathurst is really now in W—, and when he arrived?"

The boy laughed an odd laugh, and full of mischief.

"Mr. Bathurst is here," he said. "I can't tell just when he did arrive."

"Then you did not come together?"

"Well, Oh, no, indeed!" laughing again. "Mr. Bathurst is too smart for that."

Constance smiled with a returning feeling of ease and restfulness.

"Ah, I see I can trust Mr. Bathurst—and you, and lost I ask the wrong question if I continue. I will not ask another one; tell Mr. Bathurst I rely on him to straighten all the tangles; and that I like his messenger almost as much as his message."

"My but ain't she a rum young lady," mused the boy, as he trudged away from Wardour Place with his lightened tray of ivory, "and handsome! jingo! if I was Mr. Bathurst I'd work for her, just to see her smile, and no pay; but Lord, he don't care, he don't care; he'll work just as hard for any old crone; he's another rum one."

"Ah, what a relief," breathed Constance, reading for the third time Bathurst's reassuring note. "I begin to feel like myself once more. Now I am ready for you, Mr. private detective Belknap."

And, truly, Constance was herself once more. Poor Mrs. Allston, sitting aloof, and abandoned during the days of her niece's perturbation of mind, was the first to receive the benefit of the returning sunshine. Constance, for reasons which any woman can guess, had kept her anxiety, concerning Doctor Heath, a profound secret from this good lady; and she, watching the signs of the times, made no comments, but speculated profoundly—and, wide of the mark.

"You should have gone with me to drive, yesterday, Con," said Mrs. Allston to Constance, who was sitting in her aunt's room, half an hour after the departure of her small messenger, was endeavoring to atone for her neglect of the past few days by chatting cheerily upon every subject but the one which was of deepest interest to herself.

"You should have been with me and seen Sybil Lamotte."

"Sybil! Did you call there?"

"Oh, no. I can't get on with Mrs. Lamotte well enough to brave such a call alone; she is too stately and non-committal for me."

"You don't understand her, auntie; but Sybil, did you speak with her?"

"Yes, we met just over the bridge, and Sybil stopped the carriage to ask after you; I think she is anxious to see you."

"Poor Sybil," said Constance, contritely. "I have neglected her of late; but we will drive there to-morrow; to-day I don't feel just like going out. Does Sybil look well, auntie?"

Mrs. Allston leaned forward and lifted a plump forefinger to give emphasis to her words.

"Con, Sybil is dying or going mad, I can't tell which."

"Auntie! why?"

But Mrs. Allston went on rapidly. "I never saw such a change; two weeks ago, one week ago, even the last time she came here, Sybil seemed nervous to bear her trouble, she carried herself well and seemed firm as a rock."

"Outwardly."

"Outwardly of course, one couldn't feel much secret pride, compelled to live under the same roof with that low man she has married; but Sybil is not calm outwardly now, she has lost all that brilliant color."

"So much the better; it was the outward token of a mental excitement that would soon drive her mad; Sybil should never have attempted to brave criticism, and bear her shame so publicly. Every time she has allowed that man to appear beside her in the streets of W—, has shortened her life as surely as slow poison could do it."

"Well! mark my word, she won't undergo the ordeal much longer; her eyes have lost their steady light and luster."

and have a wild, frightened, expectant look impossible to describe; when a horse came suddenly up behind us, she started and almost screamed with fright, and I could see her hands tremble and her lips quiver for minutes after; hands, they are mere claws! and she is growing more shadowy every day.

"Auntie, hush! you have made me nervous as you picture Sybil. I shall not rest until I see her."

"There is a gentleman to see you, Miss Constance, said Nelly, from the doorway, which position she had gained unnoticed by the two ladies.

Constance gave a nervous start, and then arose hastily.

"Who is it, Nelly?" she asked, merely for appearance sake, for she fully expected to see Mr. Belknap.

"He didn't give his name, Miss, but said he come by appointment. It's the same gentleman as called a few days ago."

"Oh! then he won't detain me long," said the young lady, a resolute look coming into her eyes. "Auntie, I'll be with you again in a very few moments."

"He won't be very graciously received," was Mrs. Allston's mental comment. "I know that gleam of the eye, and what it means."

But Mrs. Allston was mistaken for once.

"Oh, Mr. Belknap," Constance said, sweeping into his presence with her proudest air, and smiling upon him her sweetest smile. "I am glad you have come."

"Promptness is our first lesson in my profession," replied he, with an affable smile.

"Yes! and have you learned anything new since Monday?"

"Nothing of importance. The party under suspicion has been entertaining a friend, and has been out very little."

"Oh!"

"One thing occurred on Monday last, not long after I had left you, which I can't help looking on with suspicion."

"Indeed! and may I hear it?"

"I think so. Without stopping to explain my modes of taking observations, I will give the bare fact. On Monday afternoon, while Doctor Heath was alone in his office, a boy, carrying on his head a tray of carvings, stopped at the foot of the stairs, set down his tray, ran up the flight like a young cat, and just as quietly, and slipped a note underneath the office door."

"Really!" in real surprise, and some disturbance of mind. "And you know nothing more about the note?"

"Nothing; but I shall soon I trust."

"Then you intend following up this case, Mr. Belknap?"

He looked up with a start of astonishment.

"Is not that your intention?"

"Decidedly not."

"But—have you consulted with Mr. Lamotte?"

"I have consulted with no one, sir. I thought over the matter once more, and decided to let my own mind guide my actions."

"But Mr. Lamotte thinks the case should be pushed."

"Mr. Lamotte is my neighbor, not my guardian. He is good enough to advise me sometimes; I think he would scarcely presume to dictate."

"Ah! then I am to consider myself no longer in your service?"

She bowed her head.

"After I have cancelled my indebtedness to you," she said, serenely.

With a look of vexation that he could not hide, the private detective drew from his pocket a memorandum book, and from thence a slip of paper, which he handed to Constance.

"This is my statement," he said.

She ran her eye over the itemized account, smiling a little as she did so. Then, rising swiftly, she said:—

"Excuse me for one moment."

He bowed silently, and she went out, returning soon with a bank cheque, which she placed in his hands, saying:—

"So ends the case of the Wardour diamonds. I shall not take it up again."

"What! do you really mean that?"

"I really do."

The detective opened his lips, as if about to remonstrate, then closed them suddenly, and moved toward the door.

"Do you still cling to your intention of notifying the town authorities, and setting them upon Doctor Heath?" she asked.

He turned toward her, with a peculiar smile upon his face. "You have offered a reward for your jewels, I believe?"

"You mistake, I have offered a reward for the apprehension of the thief or thieves."

"And—as you have withdrawn the case, shall you withdraw your reward also?"

"By no means."

"Then—if I bring you both the jewels and the thieves my reward should be doubled?"

A queer gleam shot from her eyes, as she answered, without hesitation:—

"And so I shall. Place my robbers in the county jail, and put my diamonds in my hands, and you shall receive a double reward."

"Then, for the present, I shall keep my claws in my own hands; Miss Wardour, I wish you good morning." And the private detective stalked from the room with the air of a man who was overflowing with desirable information.

"That's a queer woman," mused Mr.

Belknap, as he turned his face away from Wardour. "I can't make her out. If it were not altogether too fishy, I should say she had a suspicion concerning those diamonds. I intend to look a little closer into the doings of Miss Wardour; and, blow hot, or blow cold, I'm bound to have my reward, if not by this, why by that."

With this enigmatical reflection, he looked up to behold, sitting by the roadside, a tramp of sinister aspect, who turned his head indolently as the detective approached, and then applied himself closer to a luncheon of broken victuals, eating like a man famished. Mr. Belknap, who, on this occasion, had visited Wardour on foot, came quite close upon the man, and then halted suddenly, putting his hand in his pocket, as if with charitable intent; instantly the tramp dropped his fragment of bread, and sprang to his feet, with outstretched hands, as if greedy for the expected bounty. He was a dirty, ragged fellow, undersized, but strong and sinewy, with an ugly scarred face, and a boorish gait and manner. As the private detective withdrew his hand from his pocket and tendered the tramp a small coin, a passer-by, had there been such, would have called the scene a tableaux of alms-giving; but what the detective said was:—

"Well, Roake, here you are; are you ready for business?"

And the tramp replied: "You bet, if it's a solid racket."

"Then follow me, at a distance, until we reach a place where we can talk things over." And Mr. Belknap moved on, never once glancing back.

The tramp once more seated himself beside the fence, and resumed his occupation. When the last scrap of the food was devoured, he arose, and taking up a rough stick that served as a cane, he followed the receding form of the private detective.

At sunset, Ray Vandey presented himself p. actually for further instructions, at Wardour.

"You are released, Ray," said Constance, coming to meet him, with a bright face and a warm hand-clasp. "You are free to follow your own devices; Doctor Heath has a better guardian than either you or I."

"Cool, upon my word," said Ray, with a grimace. "So I am discharged without references?"

"Even so, and you must be content without an explanation, too, for the present. My tongue is still tied."

"Worse and worse, Conny; can't I even know who has supplanted me?"

"It's a great secret, and must be carefully guarded, but I believe I will confide that much to you, as it does not conflict with any promises."

"Well! I listen."

"Doctor Heath is protected by an able detective. His name I must not communicate."

Ray Vandey opened wide his handsome eyes, and gave vent to a long, low whistle.

"Conny, you are too deep for me," he said; "I am all at sea; I will drop the subject, as it is working severely upon my curiosity."

For a few moments they sat in silence, Constance thinking how much she regretted not asking Mr. Bathurst to make himself known to this loyal friend, who must now be kept in ignorance, however worthy he might be of all confidence, and Ray thinking of something that caused his face to sadden, and his eyes to darken with inward pain. Presently he drew a little nearer his hostess, and asked, in a low, sorrowful tone:—

"Conny, have you seen her lately?"

"Not for a week or more, Ray."

"I saw her yesterday."

"And she," anxiously; "did she see you, Ray?"

"No, thank God! she was driving with her mother, and Con.," his voice broke and he turned his face away; "I wish you would go to her."

"Why, Ray?"

"Because—oh, you should have seen her face. She is suffering horribly; she is dying by inches."

CHAPTER XXIII.

At early morn on the next day, Jasper Lamotte and his son, Frank, were seated together in the dining-room of Mapleton.

Jasper Lamotte was hurriedly eating a bountiful and appetizing lunch, and washing it down with plenty of light claret; and Frank was seated near the table, smoking a strong cigar, and giving an attentive ear to the words of his sire.

"That is the first time we have got the lead on Burrill," said the elder Lamotte, "and in some way it must be made to count. Drunk or sober, heretofore, he has looked after his interests too closely to serve ours."

"The devil's got into Burrill," replied Frank, bending forward to knock the ashes from his black cigar; "and into the rest of the family too, I should say:

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"Well, he is sober this morning."

"Really, have you seen him?"

"Yes, I went to his room to ask him some questions about Burrill. I found him white as a cloth, and quite as limp; he had overdone himself at his last carouse; is as sick as a dog, and on the verge of delirium tremens if a man ever was. He won't get out of his bed for a few days, if I am a judge; the room was full of medical perfumes, and his mother was trying to induce him to drink some hot coffee."

"And Burrill?"

"He knew nothing of him, and recommended me to look after my own vermin."

"He's a sharp tongued cur," said Frank, with a short laugh.

"Next, I went to Sybil's rooms; she was sitting over a roaring fire, wrapped in a shawl, and shivering from head to foot; she almost shrieked at the mention of Burrill's name; Sybil looks bad, very bad. When we get these other matters safely settled, we must do something for the girl."

"And that means—"

"That we must master Burrill. We will soon be in a position to do it, I hope."

"I hope so," gloomily.

"We must be, or be ruined. You will settle this business with Constance, at once, to-day?"

"Yes—I suppose so."

"You suppose! man, you talk as if you were leading a forlorn hope. Do you expect a refusal?"

"I don't know what to expect," flinging away his cigar, angrily, "I can't understand Constance? I wish that cursed Heath were safely out of my path."

"Can't you trust him to Belknap?"

"There we are again! what is that confounded detective doing? He has been here five days, or nearly that; four days ago, Constance asked three days to consider upon the case. What did that mean? Belknap should have been here with his report long ago. Why don't he come?"

"That I can't tell you; he has his own way of doing things; his absence does not alter the fact, that I must use this opportunity for getting to the city; and you must press this business with Constance, and bring it to a settlement. I don't think there is much doubt as to her answer."

"Well, I wish I could feel as sanguine, that's all."

At this moment there came the sound of wheels on the gravel outside, and glancing toward the window, Frank sprang an exclamation:—

(To be Continued.)

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