

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.)

CHAPTER X.

Miss Wardour and the private detective had just completed their work of transferring to paper a minute description of the Wardour diamonds, when the door opened quietly, and Francis Lamotte, pale, heavy-eyed, but quite composed, appeared before them.

"Have you finished your work?" he asked wearily. "If so, may I intrude?"

"Come, by all means," replied Constance, gently. "You are not intruding, Frank."

"Thank you." He came forward, and sank listlessly into a chair. "Constance, who brought you this news about Sybil?"

Constance glanced toward the detective, and Francis, interpreting the look, hastened to say:

"It is known to Mr. Belknap, I presume—this shameful business. There is no use of secrecy, where all the world is already agape. My sister, you tell me, has eloped with a low brute. I am numbed with the horror of it. But I must hear it all; every word, every particular. Who brought you the news, Constance?"

"Doctor Heath," replied the girl, icily.

"Ah!" The interjection came through shut teeth, and just for a moment the dark shadow flitted across his features; then he said, with quiet composure:

"Heath? ah, yes; and he gave you all the particulars—all that he had gathered?"

"Doctor Heath told me all that he had learned," she replied, still coldly.

Frank Lamotte arose slowly, wearily. "I must see Heath," he said, taking up his hat. "It is small wonder that you speak so frostily to the brother of a girl who has disgraced herself, Constance. However, I realize my fall; henceforth, I know my place."

The detective arose and moved uneasily to the window.

"I am sorry to hear this absurdity, Frank," said Constance, with some severity. "You know my position always in these matters; only yourself can injure yourself in my eyes; and I am sorry to hear you speak thus of Sybil. I have yet to be convinced that in some manner, she is not more a victim than disloyal. I have not condemned her; why should you, her brother?"

A hot flush came over the young man's face, and his eyes glowed with a strange light. He shifted his position uneasily; then, abruptly, he turned to the detective.

"If under the circumstances, and having seen my mood, you care to accept my hospitality, it is still extended, sir," he said, somewhat awkwardly; "will you accompany me to town, and afterwards lunch with me?"

"I will accompany you to the town," replied the detective, coming back from the window; "but I fear I must decline your hospitality for to-day; another time, perhaps."

Francis bowed stiffly, then turned to Constance.

"Constance, good bye," he said, mournfully, holding out his hand. "I will not displease you again I will keep at a safe distance."

"You will displease me by doing that," she replied, kindly, at the same time extending her hand. "I mean by staying away; I want you to come often, and to bring me any news that may come from Sybil. Remember I intend to be her champion, and you must be mine."

"Then I may come as a bringer of news?" he asked.

"You may come as usual," she retorted, a trifle sharply, "and come especially when there is news."

"Thank you," he bowed over her hand, then turned to the private detective.

"Good morning, Miss Wardour," said that individual, coming forward; "it is probable that I shall not see you again, as I will leave for the city this evening, but you will hear from me as the case progresses, or it is possible that I may find it expedient to pay this place another visit."

"In which case, you will of course present yourself," smiled Constance.

"May I ask where you intend to pass your time until you leave for the city, sir?"

"I can hardly say; about the town, as it may happen."

"Ah! Pardon the question; I was thinking of the business in hand; you can hardly hope to find anything new in the village."

"One can never tell, Miss Wardour. If I do learn anything new, you shall hear from me. Present my adieux to Mrs. Alston, and once more good day."

Constance watched the two as they walked away, together, the handsome like form of the younger man in such marked contrast with the shambling gait of the detective. Only for a moment, however, then she went swiftly through the halls, out at a rear entrance, and down the path toward the rear gardens.

Here she found the tramp detective busy, or pretending to busy himself with a small pruning knife.

"If you want to follow him, you must make haste," she said, breathlessly; "he is walking toward with Mr. Lamotte; intends to loiter about the town and take some evening train."

"Pray don't appear so much excited," said the tramp detective, dropping his pruning knife, and picking it up again with great deliberation. "There is a man coming up from the river, he must be

getting pretty near us. No, don't look back now."

"Dear me!" began Constance. "Listen," he went on, without regarding her ejaculation. "I am going to leave here in two minutes you can say that you have discharged me. I may not see you again for months. I may return at any time. I may as well warn you here, not to confide anything to Mr. Belknap at another time you will learn why. Another thing, it is just possible that you may need my services at some future time. I was about to give you an address that will reach me at any time, but we may be observed by that fellow who is coming. I will send you by mail a card containing the address. Pray call upon me if you need my aid. I hope Belknap will find your robbers, but you were wise not to tell him that you had saved your diamonds. Keep your counsel on that subject always, Miss Wardour, it will save you trouble. And now you had better move on. I intend to follow and overtake your two departing guests."

He turned carelessly away as he spoke, and Constance, after a pretense of examining the shrubbery, faced about and walked a few paces down the path, then lifting her eyes carelessly, they fell upon the intruder. Uttering a low ejaculation of surprise, she hastened toward him.

"Evan! why Evan!" she cried, anxiously. "You look ghostly, and you must be in trouble."

"Or I would not be here," said Evan Lamotte, bitterly. "Evan, the never-dowell, does not seek his friends when the sun shines. Eh, Conny? Don't go in," laying one hand upon her arm, as she was about to turn toward the house, "I came to talk with you."

"But you will come in, Evan?"

"No, I should fall out with your old cat—I beg pardon, Con., I mean your old aunt, directly."

"Aunt Honor shut herself in her own room an hour ago, child; she has been worn out with too much excitement. We have had a detective here all the morning, not to mention Frank, who has made a wonderful discovery."

"I dare say," muttered the young fellow, dryly. "Frank will make another wonderful discovery soon. Conny," clutching at her arm again, "have you heard?"

"Have I heard what, Evan?"

"About Sybil—my sister," his voice broke, ending in a sob.

"Yes, Evan," she replied, very gently. "I have heard."

"It was noticeable, the difference between her treatment of this younger brother of Sybil Lamotte and the one who had just gone."

With Francis she had preserved, even while her heart was full of sympathy and pity for his trouble, a certain dignity even in her kindness, an arm's length repellent stateliness, that galled and tormented the ardent, impulsive, and too eager young man. With Evan she was all pity, all sympathy, full of familiar sisterly kindness and patience.

Women are strange creatures; we may be as handsome as the Apollo, and they will steel their hearts against us. If we would have the confidence, the caresses, the tenderest love of a pitying woman, we must be mentally, or morally, or physically maimed, or halt, or blind.

Evan Lamotte was one of the world's unfortunates, and the pitying heart of the fair heiress had no scorn for such as he. A black sheep, so they called Evan Lamotte, not yet of age, with a slender physique, a pale, handsome face, handsome in spite of his dissipation. He seemed possessed of an evil spirit, that cried incessantly, "drink, drink, drink." Every means had been tried to win him from his dissipation; tears, entreaties, threats, bribes, were alike unavailing. In spite of himself, against himself, Evan Lamotte seemed driven downward by a relentless, unseen enemy.

"Reckless, worthless, hopeless." These were the adjectives commonly coupled with his name, and yet his sister had deemed him worth her loving; his mother had deemed him worth her tears, and Constance Wardour had deemed him worth her pitying kindness.

"Constance," he choked back the sobs that arose in his throat; "don't think that I have been drinking; when a fellow like me is grieved almost to madness, you call him maudlin, but I never cry in my cups, Con. And I have been perfectly sober since Saturday night, or if you like, yesterday morning. I drank hard all that day after they told me, Con., but not one drop since; not one. Con., tell me what have you heard?"

"About all that is known, I think, Evan. Oh! Evan, do you know, can you guess why she has done this—this terrible thing? Come down this walk, Evan; let us sit under that tree, on that bench."

She moved toward the spot indicated, he following mechanically, and seating himself beside her, in obedience to her gesture.

"Do I know the reason?" he repeated. "Do I guess it? Oh, if I could guess it, it has haunted me every moment; that strong desire to know what drove my sister to this fate? It is the question I came here to ask. Con., help me to think; she must have said something; must have given you some hint."

"Alas, but she never did."

"And you can't guess; you have no clue to help us unravel this mystery?"

Constance shook her head.

"Con., oh, Con., you don't think—you can't think that she loved that—that beast?"

"No, Evan, I can't think that."

"Evan," excitedly; "you must think as I do; that there is a mystery; that there has been foul play. Con., I don't care for anything on earth, except Sybil; I must know what has driven her to this; I must help her; I can help her; I can take her from that brute."

His face was livid, and his eyes glowed with the fierce light that we have seen in the eyes of his elder brother. Constance saw the growing excitement, and sought to soothe it.

"Evan, let us not anticipate," she said, gently. "All that we can do for Sybil shall be done, but it must be with her consent. When does your father come?"

"I don't know," sullenly "I telegraphed him Saturday; he will come to-day, no doubt. But he will come too late."

"Alas, yes; I regret so much that it was for my sake he was absent from home at such a time, and Frank, too."

"Frank? bah! What could he do? What could any one do?"

She turned, and scanned his face keenly.

"Evan, you suspect, or you know something."

"I have a thought," he replied. "I hardly dare call it a suspicion. If I could know it to be the truth," he hissed, between set, white teeth, "I should know what to do, then."

"Don't look like that, Evan; you look wicked."

"I feel wicked," he cried, fiercely. "You can never guess how wicked. When I think of that brute, that beast, that viper; of the power he must hold over her, I am mad, crazed. But he will come back, and then—I will murder him and set her free."

With his gleaming eyes, his clenched hands, his white, uplifted face, he looked like a beautiful evil demon. Constance shuddered as she gazed, and then her hand closed firmly upon his arm, as she said:

"Evan, listen: Do you think it would lighten Sybil's burden to hear you rave thus? Do you want to make her lot still harder to bear? Sybil loves you. Would it make her heart lighter to have you embroil yourself for her sake? You know your faults. If you let this hideous idea take place in your mind now, it will break out some day when the demon possesses you. If Sybil Lamotte returns, and hears you utter such threats, she will have an added torture to bear; she will have two curses instead of one. You can not help Sybil by committing an act that would cut you off from her forever. You have caused her heart-aches enough already. See, now, if you can not lighten her burden in some different, better way. But all this is superfluous, perhaps. I wonder if Sybil will come back, at all?"

Lower and lower sank his head, as he listened, and then something that she had said seemed to chain and hold his thoughts.

Slowly the evil light faded from his eyes, and into his face crept a strange, fixed look. Forgetful of time, or of his companion's presence, his thoughts followed this new course, his hands clenching and unclenching themselves, his teeth burying themselves from time to time in his thin under lip. So long he sat thus, that Constance, from watching and wondering at his strange mood, wandered off into a sad reverie, the subject of which she could hardly have told it was such a vague mixture of Sybil's sorrows and her own unrest.

After a time he stirred as if arousing himself with difficulty from a nightmare; and Constance, recalled to herself, in turn looked up to encounter his gaze, and to be astonished at the new, purposeful self-restraint upon his face, and the inscrutable intenceness of his eye.

"Con.," he said slowly, even his voice seeming to have gained a new strange undertone, "Con., you are an angel. You have set me on my feet."

"On your feet, Evan?"

"Yes, on my feet, mentally at least. I don't suppose any one could set me permanently on my physical, corporeal pins. Beg pardon for the slang, Conny, I don't forget how you and Sybil used to lecture me for that, and my other vices. Poor sis, she had given up the drink talks latterly, given me over as hopeless, and so I am, Con., I have made a new resolve."

Constance smiled faintly.

"Oh, you smile. You think I am going to swear off again. No, Con., that's of no use, I should know myself for a liar all the time. I shall never quit liquor; I can't and I tell you," he whispered this fiercely, "they know that I can't, and they know why I can't. Oh! you need not recoil; we are not the first family that has inherited a taint; and I am the one unfortunate in whom that taint has broken forth. Let me tell you a secret; since my first potation, my mother has never once remonstrated with me; never once upbraided; my proud, high tempered mother. She knows the folly of trying to reclaim the irreclaimable. But," lowering his voice, sadly, "my mother never loved me."

She shuddered at the tone, knowing that this last statement, at least, was all too true, and, to direct his thoughts from so painful and delicate a subject, said:

"And your resolve then, Evan?"

"My resolve," his mouth setting into

hard lines once more. "On, that! well, it is a resolve you put into my head, Con., although I'll swear the thought was never in your mind. I have resolved to act upon your advice; to curb my headstrong temper, and to help Sybil, when the right time comes, in the right way."

She looked at him fixedly.

"Evan, are you sure this last state of mind is not worse than the first?"

He laughed, ironically.

"How hard it is to make you believe that any good exists in me."

"Oh, not that, Evan, but you look so strange; not so wild as before, but—"

"Just as wicked."

"Well, yes."

"Well, Con., you can't expect a fellow to feel pious all in an instant; mine is a pious resolve, and the proper feeling must follow. Isn't that about how they preach it?"

"That's about how they preach it, sir. Now listen, I don't intend to stir one step, or allow you to stir, until you have explained some of your dark sayings; you are going to tell me what this new resolve is."

(To be Continued.)

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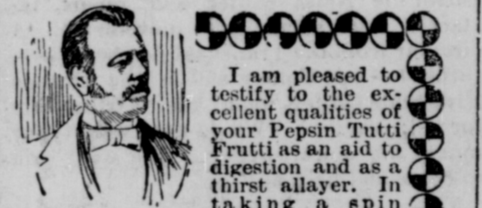
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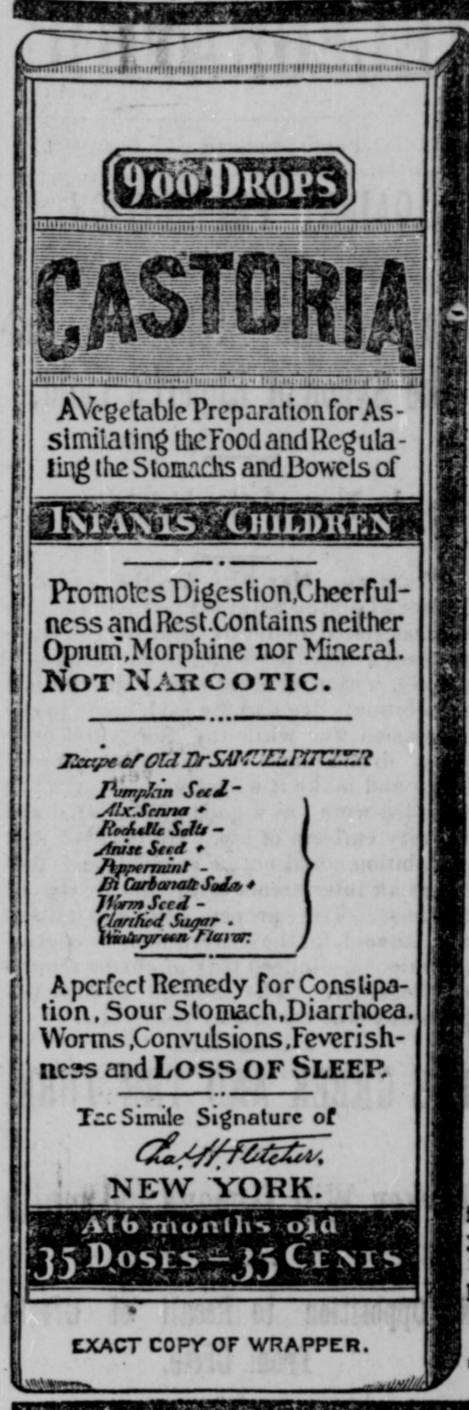
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