

The Last Stroke.

BY LAWRENCE L. LYNCH,

Author of "A Woman's Crime," "John Arthur's Ward,"
"The Diamond Coterie," "Against Odds," Etc.

CONTRIBUTED

"I had not thought of that, and yet it looks simple and rational enough," and then, while they walked down the quiet street running parallel with Main, and upon which Mrs. Marcy's cottage stood, the doctor told the story of the morning, briefly but clearly, adding, at the end, "In telling this much, I am telling you actually all that I know."

"All—concerning Miss Grant, too?"
"Everything."
The doctor did not lift his eyes from the path before them, and again the detective shot a side glance from the corner of his eye, and the shadow of a smile crossed his face.

"How does it happen that this brother is here so—I was about to say—opportune?"
"He told me that he came by appointment, but on an earlier train than he had at first intended to take, to pass Sunday with his brother."

"Now see," mused Ferrars, "what little things done or left undone, shape or shorten our lives! If he had telegraphed to his brother, announcing his earlier arrival, there would have been no target practice, but a walk to the station instead."

The doctor sighed and for a few moments walked on in silence. Then as they neared the cottage he almost stopped short and turned toward the detective.

"I'm afraid you will think me a sad bungler, Ferrars. I should have told you at once that Robert Briery awaits us at Mrs. Marcy's cottage."
"Robert Briery? Is that his name? I wonder if he can be the Robert Briery who has helped to make one of our morning papers so bright and breezy. A rising young journalist, in fact. But it's probably another of the name."

"I don't know. He has not spoken of himself. Will it suit you to meet him at once?"

"We don't often get the chance to begin as would best suit us, we hunters of our kind. I would have preferred first to go to the scene of death, but I suppose the ground has been trampled over and over, and besides, I don't want to advertise myself until I am better informed at least. Go on, we will let our meeting come as it will."

But things seldom went on as they would for long, when Frank Ferrars was seeking his way toward a truth or fact. They found Mrs. Marcy at the door, and she at once led them to the upper room which looked out upon the side and rear of the little lawn, and was screened from inlookers, as well as from the sun's rays, by tall cherry trees at the side, and thick and clinging morning glory vines at the back.

"You'll be quite safe from intrusion here," she murmured and left them, as she had received them at the door.

If Doctor Barnes had feared for his patient's strength, and dreaded the effect upon her of the coming interview, he was soon convinced that he had misjudged the courage and will power of this slight, soft-eyed, low-voiced and unassuming young woman. She was very pale, and her eyes looked out from their dark circles like wells of grief. But no tears fell from them, and the low pathetic voice did not falter when she said, after the formal presentation, and before either of the others had spoken—

"I have asked to be present at this interview, Mr. Ferrars, and I am told that it rests with you whether I am admitted to your confidences. Charles Briery is my betrothed, and I would to God I had yielded to his wish and married him a week ago. Then no one could have shut me out from ought that concerns him, living or dead. In the sight of heaven he is my husband, for we promised each other eternal faithfulness with our hands clasped above his mother's Bible."

Francis Ferrars was a singular mixture of sternness and gentleness; of quick decision at need and of patient consideration, and he now took one of the cold little hands between his own, and gently but firmly led her to the cosy chair from which she had arisen.

"You have proven your right to be here, and no one will dispute it. We may need your active help soon, as much as we need and desire your counsel and your closer knowledge of the dead man now."

In moments of intense feeling conventionalities fall away from us and strong soul speaks to strong soul. While they awaited the coming of the doctor and Francis Ferrars, Hilda Grant and Robert Briery had been unable to break through the constraint which seemed to each to be the mental attitude of the other, and then, too, both were engrossed with the same thought, the coming of the detective, and the possibilities this suggested, for underlying the grievous sorrow of both brother and sweetheart lay the thought, the silent appeal for justice as inherent in our poor human nature as is humanity itself.

But Hilda's sudden claim, her prayer for recognition struck down the barrier of strangeness and the selfishness of sorrow, than which sometimes nothing can be more exclusive, in the mind and heart of Robert Briery, and he came swiftly to her

side, as she sank back, pallid and panting, upon her cushions.
"Miss Grant, my sister; no other claim is so strong as yours. It was to meet you, to know you, that I set out for this place to-day. In my poor brother's last letter—you shall read it soon—he said, 'I am going to give you something precious, Rob, a sister. It is to meet her that I have asked you to come just now.' I claim that sister, and need her now if never before. Don't look upon me as a stranger, but as Charles's brother, and yours." He placed his hand over hers, as it rested weakly upon the arm of her chair, and as it turned and the chill little fingers closed upon his own, he held it for a moment and then, releasing it gently, drew a seat beside her and turned toward the detective.

"Mr. Ferrars, your friend has assured me that I may hope, for your aid. Is that so?"

"When I have heard all that you can tell me, I will answer," replied Ferrars. "If I see a hope or chance of unravelling what now looks like a mystery—should it be proved a mystery—I will give you my promise, and my services."

He had seated himself almost opposite Hilda Grant, and while he quietly studied her face, he addressed the doctor.

"Tell me," he said, "all you know and have been told by others, and be sure you omit not the least detail."

Beginning with the appearance of Mr. Doran at his office door, with the painting and perspiring black pony, the doctor detailed their drive and his first sight of the victim, reviewing his examination of the body in detail, while the detective listened attentively and somewhat to the surprise of the others, without interruption, until the narrator had reached the point when, accompanied by Briery, he had followed the hearse, with its painful burden, back to the village. Then Ferrars interposed.

"A moment, please," taking from an inner pocket a broad, flat letter case and selecting from it a printed card, which, with a pencil, he held out to the doctor.

"Be so good," he said, "as to sketch back of this, the spot where you found the dead man, the mound in full, with the road indicated, above and beyond it. I remember you used to be skillful at sketching things."

CHAPTER V.

When the doctor had completed his hasty sketch, he returned the card upon which it was made, to the detective, and silently awaited his comment.

"It is very helpful," said Ferrars. "It would seem, then, that just opposite the mound the lake makes an inward curve?"

"Yes."
"And that the centre of the mound corresponds to the central or nearest point of the curve?"

The doctor nodded assent.
"Now am I right in thinking that anything occurring at this central point would be unseen from the road?"

"Quite right. The mound rises higher than the road, and its length shuts off the view at either end, and the line of the road, which curves away from the lake at the north end, and runs in an almost straight direction for some distance at the other."

A Most Valuable Agent.

The glycerine employed in Dr. Pierce's medicines greatly enhances the medicinal properties which it extracts from native medicinal roots and holds in solution much better than alcohol would. It also possesses medicinal properties of its own, being a valuable demulcent, nutritive, antiseptic and antiferment. It adds greatly to the efficacy of the Black Cherry bark, Bloodroot, Golden Seal root, Stone root, and Queen's root, contained in "Golden Medical Discovery" in subduing chronic, or lingering coughs, bronchitis, throat and lung affections, for all of which these agents are recommended by standard medical authorities.

In all cases where there is a wasting away of flesh, loss of appetite, with weak stomach, as in the early stages of consumption, there can be no doubt that glycerine acts as a valuable nutritive and aids the Golden Seal root, Stone root, Queen's root and Black Cherry bark in promoting digestion and building up the flesh and strength, controlling the cough and bringing about a healthy condition of the whole system. Of course, it must not be expected to work miracles. It will not cure consumption except in its earlier stages. It will cure very severe obstinate, hang-on, chronic coughs, bronchitis and laryngeal troubles, and chronic sore throat with hoarseness. In acute coughs it is not so effective. It is in the lingering hang-on coughs, or those of long standing, even when accompanied by bleeding from lungs, that it has performed its most marvelous cures.

Send to Dr. R. V. Pierce, of Buffalo, N. Y., for free booklet telling all about the native medicinal roots composing this wonderful medicine. There is no alcohol in it.

"Golden Medical Discovery" enriches and purifies the blood curing blotches, pimples, eruptions, scrofulous swellings and old sores, or ulcers.

Send to Dr. R. V. Pierce, of Buffalo, N. Y., for free booklet telling all about the native medicinal roots composing this wonderful medicine. There is no alcohol in it.

1 sec. and again for a moment Ferrars consulted the sketch.

"Then—"
"Did you measure the distance between the target and the spot where the body was found?"

"No. It was the usual distance for practice. I should think."

"It was rather a long range," interposed Briery. "I am something of a shot myself and I noticed that." Again the detective pondered over the sketch.

"By this time I dare say," he said presently, "there will be any number of curious people in the wood and about that spot."

"I doubt it," replied Doctor Barnes. "I thought of that, and spoke to Doran. Mr. Briery was so well liked by all that it only needed a word to keep the men and boys from doing anything that might hinder a thorough investigation."

"Two men are upon the road just below the school house to turn back the thoughtless curious ones. It was Doran's foresight," added the honest physician. "I suppose you will wish to explore the wood near the mound."

Ferrars laid aside the sketch. "As the coroner," he said, "you can help me. Of course, you can have no doubt as to the nature of the shooting. There could be no mistake."

"None. The shot at the back could not have been self-inflicted." Then if you can rely upon your constables and this man Doran, let them make a quiet inquiry up and down the wood road in search of any one who may have driven over it between the hours of—

"Eight and ten o'clock," said Hilda Grant. "He," meaning her late friend, "left his boarding place at eight o'clock, or near it, and he was found shortly before ten."

Her speech was low and hesitating, but it did not falter.

"Thank you," said the detective, and turned again to the doctor.
"Next," he said, "if you can find a trusty man, who will drive out for us if any boat or boats have been seen about the lake shore during those hours, it will be another step in the right direction. And now, you have told me that you suspect no one; that there is no clue whatever." He glanced from one to the other. "Still we are told that very often by those who should know best, but who were not trained to such searching. To begin, I must know something, Mr. Briery, about your brother and his past. Is he your only brother?"

"Yes. We lost a sister ten years ago, a mere child. There were no other children."
"And—your parents?"

"Are both dead."

"Ah! Mr. Briery, give me, if you please, a sketch of your life and of your brother's, dating, let us say, from the time of your father's death."

If the request was unexpected or unwelcome to Robert Briery he made no sign, but began at once.

"I do not go into details sufficiently, Mr. Ferrars," he said, by way of preamble, "you will, so of course, interrogate me."

The detective nodded, and Briery went on.

"My father was an Episcopalian clergyman, and, at the time of his death, we were living in one of the wealthy suburbs of Chicago, where he had held a charge for ten years, and where we remained for six years after he gave up the pulpit. Being in comfortable circumstances, we found it a most pleasant place of residence. My sister's death brought us our first sorrow, and it was soon followed by the loss of our mother. We continued to live, however, in the old home until my brother and I were ready to go to college, and then my father shut up the house and went abroad with a party of congenial friends. My father was not a business man, and the man to whom he had confided the management of his affairs misarranged them during his absence, to what extent we never fully knew until after my father's death, when we found ourselves after all was settled, with something like fifteen thousand dollars each, and our educations. My brother had already begun to prepare for the ministry, and I had decided early to follow the career of a journalist."

"Are you the elder?" asked the detective.

"Yes," Briery paused for further comment, but none came, and he resumed. "It had been the intention of my father that my brother and I should make the tour of the two continents when our studies were at an end; that is, our school days. He had made this same journey, in his youth and he had even mapped out routes for us, and told us of certain strange and little explored places which we must not miss, such as the rock temples of Kyles in Central India, and various wonders of Egypt. It was a favorite project of his. It will leave you less money, boys, he used to say, but it will give you what can never be taken from you. When a man knows his own world, he is better fitted for the next." And so, after much discussion, we determined to make the journey. Indeed, to Charles it began to seem a pilgrimage, in which love, duty and pleasure intermingled."

He paused, and Hilda turned away her face as a long sighing breath escaped his lips.
"Shortly after our return I took up journalistic work in serious earnest, and my brother, having been ordained, was about to accept a charge when he met with an accident which was followed by a long illness. When he arose from this, his physicians would not hear of his assuming the labors of a pastor over a large and active suburban church, and, as my brother could not bear to be altogether idle, and the country was thought to be the place for him, it ended in his coming here, to take charge of the little school. He was inordinately fond of children, and a born instructor, so it seemed to me. He was pleased with the beauty of the place and the quiet of it, from the first, and he was not long in finding his greatest happiness here."

The voice sank, and he turned a face in which gratitude and sorrow blended, upon the girl who suddenly

covered her own with her trembling hands.

But the detective, with a new look of intendment upon his face, and without a moment's pause, asked quick,ly—

"Then you have been in this place before, of course?"

"No, I have not. For the first three months Charles was very willing to come to me, in the city. Then came a very busy time for me and he came twice, somewhat reluctantly. I thought. Six months ago I was sent to New Mexico to do some special work, and returned to the city on Tuesday last." His voice broke, and he got up and walked to the window farthest from the group.

While he had been speaking, Ferrars had scribbled aimlessly, and a stroke at a time, as it seemed, upon the margin of the printed side of the card which bore the sketch made by Doctor Barnes; and now while Hilda's face was turned away and the young man at the window still stood with his back toward all in the room, he pushed the card from the edge of the table, and shot a significant glance toward the doctor.

Picking up the card Doctor Barnes glanced at it carefully, and then replaced it upon the table, having read these words—

"I wish to speak with her alone. Make it a professional necessity."

As Briery turned toward them once more the detective turned to the young girl. "I would like to hear something from you, Miss Grant, if you find yourself equal to it."

Hilda set her lips in firm lines, and after a moment said steadily—

"I am quite at your service."

"One minute," the doctor arose and addressed himself to the detective.

"I feel sure that it will be best for Miss Grant that she talk with you alone. As her physician, I will caution her against putting too great a restraint upon herself, upon her feelings. While you talk with her, Ferrars, Mr. Briery and I will go back to my quarters, unless you bid us come back."

"I do not," interposed the detective. "I will join you soon, and if need be, you can then return, doctor."

At first it seemed as if Hilda were about to remonstrate. But she caught the look of intelligence that flashed from his eyes to hers, and she sat in silence while Doctor Barnes explained the route to his cottage, and murmured a low goodbye while Briery took her hand and bent over her with a kind adieu.

"I may see you to-morrow," he answered. "You will let me come, sister?"

"The last word breathed close to the ear."

Her lips moved soundlessly, but he read her eager consent in her timid return of his hand clasp and the look in her sad, gray eyes, and followed the doctor from the room.

When Frank Ferrars had closed the door behind the two men, he wasted no time in useless words, but, seating himself opposite the girl, and so close that he could catch, if need be, her faintest whisper, he began, his own tones low and touched with sympathy—

"Miss Grant," he said, "I already feel assured that you know how many things must be considered before we can ever begin such a search as I foresee before me. Of course it may happen that before the end of the coroner's inquest some clue or key to the situation may have developed. But, if I have heard all, or, rather, if there has not been some important fact or feature overlooked, we must go behind the scenes for our data, our hints and possible clues. Do you comprehend me?"

Hilda Grant had drawn herself erect, and was listening intently with her clear eyes fixed upon his face, and she seemed with her whole soul to be studying this man, while, with her ears she took in and comprehended his every word.

"You mean," she answered slowly, "that there may be something in himself or some event or fact in his past, or that of his family, which has brought about this?" She turned away her face. She could not put the awful facts into words.

"I knew you would understand me, and it is not to his past alone that I must look for help, but to others."

"Do you mean mine?"

"Yes. You do understand?" There was a look of relief in his eyes. His lips took on a gentler curve. "I see that you are going to help me."

"If it is in my power, I surely am. Where shall we begin?"

"Tell me all that you can about Charles Briery, all that he has told you about himself. Will it be too hard?"

"No matter." She drew herself more erect. "I think if you will let me tell my own story briefly, and then fill it out as needed, by interrogation, it will be easiest for me."

"And best for me. Thank you." He leaned back and rested his hands upon the arms of his chair.

"I am ready to hear you," he said, and withdrew his full gaze from her face, letting his eyelids fall and sitting thus with half-closed eyes.

"Of course," she began, "it was only natural, or so it appeared to me, that we should become friends soon, meeting, as we must, daily, and being so constantly brought together, as upper and under teachers in this little village school. He never seemed really strange to me, and we seemed thrown upon each other for society, for the young people of the village held aloof, because of our odd, and our position, I suppose, and the people of the hotels and boarding houses found, natural, a set, or sets, by themselves. I grew up in what you might call a religious atmosphere, and when I was a minister of the gospel, I felt at once full confidence in him and met his friendly advances quite frankly. I think we understood each other very soon. You perhaps have not been told that he filled a vacancy, taking the place of a young man who was called away

"ONLY MEDICINE THAT DID ME ANY GOOD"

"Fruit-a-tives" Cured Backache After Doctors Failed Utterly.



"I have received most wonderful benefit from taking 'Fruit-a-tives.' I suffered for years from backaches and pain in the head and I consulted doctors and took every remedy obtainable without any relief. Then I began taking 'Fruit-a-tives' and this was the only medicine that ever did me any real good. I took several boxes altogether, and now I am entirely well of all my dreadful headaches and backaches. I take 'Fruit-a-tives' occasionally still, but I am quite cured of a trouble that was said to be incurable. I give this testimony voluntarily, in order that others who suffer as I suffered may try this wonderful medicine and be cured." Mrs. Frank Eaton, Frankville, Ont.

Be wise. Profit by Mrs. Eaton's example, and start with 'Fruit-a-tives.' They will quickly relieve Pain in the Back, and stop Headaches because they keep bowels, kidneys and skin in perfect order and insure the blood being always pure and rich.

"Fruit-a-tives" is now put up in the new 25c trial size as well as the regular 50c boxes. All dealers should have both sizes. If yours does not, write Fruit-a-tives Limited, Ottawa.

Because of his mother's illness, and who did not return, giving up the school at her request. It was in April, a year ago, that he—Charles—took up the work coming back, as I did, after the summer vacation. It was after that that he began telling me about himself a little; to speak often of his brother, who was, to his eyes, a model of young manhood and greatly his intellectual superior."

She paused a moment, and then with a little proud tinge of her rounded chin, resumed.

"I was not quite willing to agree as to the superiority for Charles Briery was as bright, as talented and promising a young man, as good, and as modest as an I ever knew. I hope to know, and I have met some who rank high as pastors and orators."

"I can well believe you," he said with his eyes upon her face, and his voice was sincere and full of sympathy.

"We were not engaged until quite recently. Although we both, I think, understood ourselves and each other long before. And now, what more can I say? He has told me much of his school days, of his student life, and, of course, of his brother's also. In fact, without meaning it, he had taught me to stand somewhat in awe of this high-falootin', faultless and much-beloved brother, but I have heard of no family quarrel, no enemy, no unpleasant episode of any sort. For himself, he told that he never cared for any other woman, had never been much in women's society—in fact, owing to his almost constant study and travel. Here in the village all were his friends; his pupils were all his admirers, young and old alike were his admirers, and he had room in his heart for all. No hand in Glenville was ever raised against him, I am sure."

"You think then that it was perhaps an accident, a mistake?" He was eyeing her keenly from beneath his drooping lashes.

"No!" She sprang suddenly to her feet and stood erect before him. "No, Mr. Ferrars, I do not! I cannot. I was never in my life superstitious. I do not believe it is superstition that compels me to feel that Charles Briery was murdered of intent, and by an enemy, an enemy who has stalked him unawares, for money, perhaps, and who has planned cunningly, and hid his traces well."

CHAPTER VI.

"Give me a few moments, of your time, doctor, after your guest has retired for the night."

For more than two hours after his parting with Hilda Grant, Ferrars had talked, first with Robert Briery, and then with the doctor as a third party. At the end the three had gone together to look upon the face of the dead, and now as the doctor nodded over his shoulders and silently followed, or rather guided Briery from the room and toward his sleeping apartment, the detective turned back, and when they were out of hearing, removed the covering from the still face, and taking a lamp from the table near, stood looking down upon the dead.

"No," he murmured at last, as he replaced the lamp and turned back to the side of the bier. "You never earned such a fate. You must have lived and died a good man; an honest man, and yet—" He turned quickly at the sound of the opening door. "Doctor, come here and tell me how your keen eyes and worldly intelligence weighed, measured and gauged this man who lies here with that look, that inscrutable look they all wear once they have seen the mystery unveiled. What manner of man did you find him?"

Doctor Barnes came closer and gazed reverently at the dead face.

"There lies a man who could better afford to face the mystery, suddenly, without warning, than you or I or any other living man I know. A good man, a true Christian gentleman I honestly believe, too modest perhaps to ever claim and hold his true place in this grasping world. That he should be struck down by the hand of an assassin is past belief, and yet—" He paused abruptly and bent down to replace the covering over the still, handsome face.

"And yet?" repeated the detective, "do you really think that this man was murdered?"

"Ferrars!" Both men were moving away from the side of the bier, one on either hand, and, as they came together at its foot, the speaker put a hand upon the shoulder of the detective. "To-morrow I hope you will thoroughly overlook the wood road beyond the school house, the lake shore, from the village, to the knoll or mound, and the thin strip of wood between, and then tell me if you think it possible for any one, however stupid or erratic of aims to shoot by accident a man standing in that place. There is no spot from which a bullet could have been fired whence a man could not have been seen perfectly, that figure by the lake side. The trees are so scattered, the bushes so low, the view up and down so open. It's impossible!"

"That is your fixed opinion?"

"It is. Nothing but actual proof to the contrary would change it."

When they had passed from the room and the doctor had softly closed the door, leaving the dead alone in the silence and the shaded lamp-light, they paused again, face to face, in the outer office.

"Have you any suggestions as regards the inquest, Ferrars?" asked the one.

"I have been thinking about that foolish lad, the one who saw poor Briery in the wood. Could you get him here before the inquiry? We might be able to learn more in this way. You know the lad, of course?"

"Of course. There will be very little to be got from him. But I'll have him here for you."

"Do so. And the lady, the one who drove the pony; you will call her, I suppose?"

"Certainly."

"That is all, I think. If you can drive me to the spot very early, before breakfast even, I would like it. You need not stop for me. I can find my way back, prefer to, in fact. You say it is not far?"

"Little more than half a mile from the school house."

"Then—good night, doctor."

Doctor Barnes occupied a six-room cottage with a mansard, and he had fitted up the room originally meant to be a sitting room, for his own sleeping apartment. It was at the front of the main cottage and back of it was the inner office where the body lay, the outer office being in a wing built out from this rear room and opening conveniently outward, in view of the front entrance and very close to a little side gate. A porch fitted snugly into the angle made by the former sitting room and this outer office, and both of these rooms could be entered from this convenient porch. Robert Briery occupied the room opposite that assigned the detective with the width of the hall between them and the doctor, although Ferrars did not know this, had camped down in his outer office.

Half an hour after he had parted from the doctor, Frank Ferrars, as he was called by his nearest and most familiar friends, opened the door upon the corner porch and stepped noiselessly out. When he believed that he had found an unusual case—and he cared for no others—he seldom slept until he had thought out some plan of work, adopted some theory or evolved a possibility, or, as he whimsically termed it, a "stepping stone" toward clearer knowledge.

He had answered the doctor's summons with little thought of what it might mean, or lead to, and simply because it was from "Walt." Barnes. Then he had heard the doctor's brief story, with some surprise and an inclination to think it might end, after all, in a case of accidental shooting, or self-inflicted death. But when he looked into the woe-filled eyes of lovely Hilda Grant, and clasped the hand of the dead man's brother, the case took on a new interest. Here was no commonplace village maiden hysterical and forlorn, no youth breathing out dramatic vows of vengeance upon an unknown foe. At once his heart went out to them, his sympathy was theirs, and the sympathy of Francis Ferrars was of a very select nature indeed.

And thus he had looked at the beautiful refined face of the dead man, a face that told of gentleness, sweetness, loyalty, all manifest in the calm dignity of death. Not a strong face, as his brother's face was strong, but manly with the true Christian manliness, and strong with the strength of truth. Looking upon this face, all thought of self-destruction forsook the detective, and he stood, after that first long gaze, vowed to right this deadly wrong in the only way left to a mortal.

But how strange that such a man, in such a place, should be snatched out of life by the hand of an assassin! He must think over it, and he could think best when passing slowly along some quiet by-way street. So he closed his door softly, and all unconscious that he was observed from the window of the outer office, he vaulted across the low fence, striking noiselessly upon the soft turf on the further side, and, after a moment of hesitation, turned the corner and went down Main street.

To Be Continued

THE OBSERVER and the Home Journal Canada's Leading Home Magazine, at \$1.25 per year. The Home Journal is a finely printed magazine, and after Dec. 1st will be worth \$1.00 per year. Get it while it is cheap.