

# 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.

The accused, who during the entire scene, has stood as immovable as the sphinx, and has not once been startled, disturbed, or surprised from his calm by anything that has been brought forward by the numerous witnesses, lifts his head proudly; lifts his hat, too, with a courtly gesture, to the gentlemen of the jury, that may mean total exoneration from blame, so far as they are concerned, or a haughty defiance, and then, after one sweeping glance around the assembly, a glance which turns for an instant upon the faces of the Lamottes, he beckons to the constable; beckons with a gesture that is obeyed as if it were a command.

"Corliss," he says, just as he would say—"give the patient a hot drink and two powders." "Corliss, I suppose you won't tarry to lose sight of me, since I have suddenly become public property. Come with me, if you please; I am going home; then—I am at your service."

And without more words, without let or hindrance, without so much as a murmur of disapproval, he lifts himself out of the chair, and walks, at a moderate pace, and with firm aspect, toward his cottage, closely followed by Corliss, who looks, for the first time in his official career, as if he would gladly be a simple private citizen at that moment.

The coroner's inquest is over; there remains now nothing save to remove the body to a more suitable resting place, and to disperse.

Jasper Lamotte moves about, giving short orders in a low tone. He is pallid and visibly nervous. If it were his own son who lay there in their midst, stiff and cold, and saturated with his own blood, he could scarcely appear more agitated, more shocked and sorrowful.

He is really shocked; really sorry; he actually regrets the loss of this man, who must have been a constant crucifixion to his pride.

This is what they whisper among themselves, as they gather in knots and furtively watch him, as he moves about the pier.

It has been a shock to Frank Lamotte, too, although he never had seemed to care the society of his brother-in-law, and always turned away from any mention of his name, with a sneer.

Two men, who withdraw quickly from the crowd, are Lawyer O'Meara and Ray Vandeyk. As they come up out of the cellar and go out from the hateful place, Ray breaks into bitter invective; but O'Meara lays a firm hand upon his arm.

"Hold your impulsive tongue, you young scamp! Do you want to be impeached for a prejudiced witness? You want to help Heath, not to hurt him; and let me tell you, he will need strong friends and shrewd helpers before we see him a free man again."

Ray grinds out something profane, and then paces on in wrathful silence.

"You are right, of course," he says, after a moment's pause, and in a calmer tone. "But, good God! to bring such a charge against Heath, of all men! O'Meara," suddenly, "you must defend him."

"I intend to," grimly. "And in his interest I want to see you as soon as the vicinity is quiet; we must think the matter over and then see Heath."

"Heath puzzles me; he's strangely apathetic."

"He'll puzzle you more yet, I'm thinking. I half think he knows what he did the deed, and don't intend to tell." He pauses, having come to the place where their ways diverge. "Come around by dark, Vandeyk, we can't lose any time, that is if the buzzards are out of the way."

"The buzzards will follow the carrion," scornfully. "I'll be on hand, Mr. O'Meara."

He goes on, looking longingly at Clifford Heath's cottage, as he passes the gate, and the little lawyer begins to pick his way across the muddy street, not caring to go on to the proper crossing.

"Mr. O'Meara."

He turns nervously, to encounter the gaze of a large gentleman with a rosy face, curling, iron-gray hair, and beard, and a blazing diamond in his shirt front.

"Eh! sir; you addressed me?"

"I did," replies the gentleman, in a low, energetic tone, strangely at variance with his general appearance, at the same time coming close and grasping the lawyer's hand with great show of cordiality, and before the astounded little man can realize what he is about. "Call me Wedron, sir, Wedron, ahem, of the New York Bar. I must have an interview with you, sir, and at once."

O'Meara draws back and replies rather frigidly:—

"I am glad to know you, sir; but if your business is not too urgent—if another time will do—"

"Another time will not do? my business concerns Clifford Heath."

"Then, sir, I am at your service."

(Continued)

"Mr. Wedron, of the New York Bar," for more than an hour they have been seated in the lawyer's study, conversing in low, earnest tones; and during this interval O'Meara's valuation of his vis-à-vis has evidently "taken a rise," and stands now at a high premium. His spirits have risen, too; he views the case of Clifford Heath through a new lens; evidently he recognizes in the man before him a strong ally.

It is arranged that, for the present, Mr. Wedron shall retain his room at the hotel, but shall pass the most of his time with the O'Mearas, and the uninitiated are to fancy him an old friend, as well as a brother practitioner. Even Mrs. O'Meara is obliged to accept this version, while inwardly wondering that she has never heard her husband mention his friend, "Wedron, of the New York Bar."

Evidently they trust each other, these two men, and, as O'Meara has just said, their mutual understanding is sufficient unto the hour. Therefore, it being already sunset, they go together to the parlor, and are soon seated, in company with Mrs. O'Meara, about a cosy tea table.

"It is best that Vandeyk should not see me here until after your interview with Heath," Mr. Wedron has said to the little lawyer; therefore when, a little later, Ray puts in an appearance, he sees only O'Meara, and is immediately hurried away toward the county jail.

They find Corliss at the sheriff's desk, his superior officer having been for several days absent from the town. The constable looks relieved and fatigued. He believes that within the hour he, single handed, has conveyed into safe custody one of the most ferocious assassins of his time; and, having gained so signal a victory, he now feels inclined to take upon himself airs, and he hesitates, becomingly, over O'Meara's civilly worded request to be shown to the cell assigned Doctor Heath.

But O'Meara, who possesses all the brusqueness of the average Yankee lawyer, has no mind to argue the case.

"I don't know, sir," says Corliss, with some pomposity. "Really, I consider Heath a very unsafe prisoner, and—"

"The deuce you do," breaks in the impatient lawyer. "Well, I'll promise that Doctor Heath shan't damage you any, so just trot ahead with your keys, and don't parley. My time is worth something."

Corliss slips down from his stool and looks at Ray.

"But Mr. Vandeyk, sir?" he begins.

"Mr. Vandeyk will see Doctor Heath, too, sir," interrupts Ray, with much decision. "And you won't find it to your interest, Corliss, to hunt up too many scruples."

It filters into the head of the constable that the wealthiest and most popular of W's lawyers, and the bondsman and firm friend of the absent sheriff, are hardly the men to baffle, and so, for the safety of his own official head, he takes his keys and conducts them to Doctor Heath.

The jail is new and clean and comfortable, more than can be said of many in our land, and the prisoner has a cell that is fairly lighted, and not constructed on the suffocation plan.

They find him sitting by his small table, his head resting upon his hand, his eyes fixed upon the floor, seemingly lost in thought. Evidently he is glad to see his visitors, for a smile breaks over his face as he rises to greet them.

It is not time for commonplace, and O'Meara, who sees that time is of value, is in no mood for a prologue to his task; so he begins at the right place.

"Heath, I'm sorry enough that you, almost a stranger among us, should be singled out as a victim in this case. It don't speak well for the judgment of our citizens. However, we are bound to set you right, and I've come to say that I shall esteem it a privilege to defend you—that is, if you have not a more able friend to depend upon."

The prisoner smiles as he replies:—

"You are very good, O'Meara, and you are the man I should choose to defend me; but—you will have to build your case; I can't make one for you, and—you heard the evidence!"

"Hang the evidence!" cries the lawyer, drawing from his pocket a small note book.

"We'll settle their evidence; just you give me a few items of information, and then I will let Vandeyk talk; he wants to, terribly."

The prisoner turns slowly in his chair, and looks steadfastly first at one, then at the other, and then he says:—

"Do you really believe, O'Meara, that I had no hand in this murder?"

"I do," emphatically.

"And you, Ray?"

"What!" burst out Ray Vandeyk; "you will not hunt down your enemy? This is too much! Heath, I believe you could put your hand on the assassin."

No reply from the prisoner; he sits with his head bowed upon his hand, a look of dogged resolution upon his face.

"Vandeyk," says the little lawyer, who has been gazing fixedly at his obstinate client, and who now turns two keen eyes upon the excited Ray; "keep cool! keep cool, my lad! Heath, look here, sir, I'm bound to defend your case—do you object to that?"

"On the contrary, O'Meara, you are my only hope; but your success must depend upon your own shrewdness. I can't give you any help."

Down went something in the lawyer's note book.

"That means you won't give me any help," writing briskly.

"It's an ungracious way of putting it," smiling slightly; "but—that's about the way it stands."

"Just so," writing still; "you believe the handkerchief to have been yours?"

"Yes."

"And the knife?"

"Yes. Stay, send Corliss with some one else to my office; let them examine my case of instruments, and see if the knife is among them; this, for form's sake."

"It shall be attended to—for form's sake. Heath, who besides yourself had access to your office?"

"My office was insecurely locked; any one might easily force an entrance, and a common key would open my door."

Scratch, scratch; the lawyer seems not to notice the doctor's evasion of the question.

"Ahem! As your lawyer, Heath, is there any truth in these stories about a previous knowledge of Burrill?"

"Do you mean my previous knowledge of the man?"

"Yes."

"I never knew the fellow; never saw him until I knocked him down in his first wife's defence."

"Yet he claimed to know you."

"So I am told."

"And you don't know where he may have seen you?"

"All I know, you have heard in the evidence given to-day."

"And—" hesitating lightly; "is there nothing in your past life that might weigh in your favor; nothing that will give the lie to these hints so industriously scattered by Burrill?"

"O'Meara, let us understand each other; your question means this: Do I intend, now that this crisis has come, to make public for the benefit of W—the facts concerning my life previous to my coming here as a resident? My answer must be this, and again I must give you reason to think me ungracious, ungrateful. There is nothing in my past that could help me in this present emergency; there is no one who could come forward to my assistance. I have not in all America one friend who is so well known to me, or who knows me as well as Vandeyk here, or yourself. I can not drag to light any of the events of my past life; on the contrary, I must redouble my efforts to keep that past a mystery."

Utter silence in the cell. The lawyer's pencil travels on—scratch, scratch, scratch. Ray sits moody and troubled of aspect. Doctor Heath looks with some curiosity upon the movements of the little lawyer, and inwardly wonders at his coolness. He has expected expostulation, indignation; has even fancied that his obstinate refusal to lend his friends any assistance may alienate them from his case,

leaving him to face his fate alone. He sees how Vandeyk is chafing, but he is puzzled by the little lawyer's phlegmatic acceptance of the situation.

Presently, the lawyer looks up, snaps his notebook together with a quick movement, and then stows it away carefully in his breast pocket.

"Umph!" he begins, raising the five fingers of his right hand and checking off his items with the pencil which he has transferred to the left. "Umph! Then your case stands like this, my friend: A man is found dead near your premises; a handkerchief bearing your name covers his face; a knife supposed to belong to you is with the body. You are known to have differed with this man; you have knocked him down; you have threatened him in the public streets. You are a stranger to W—, this murdered man claimed to know something to your disadvantage. He is known to have set out for your house; he is found soon after, as I have said, dead. You acknowledge the knife and handkerchief to be yours; you can offer no alibi, you can rebut none of the testimony. You refuse to tell aught concerning your past life. That's a fine case, now; don't you think so?"

"It's a worthless case for you, O'Meara. You had better leave me to fight my own battles."

"Umph! I'm going to leave you for the present; but this battle may turn out to be not entirely your property, my friend. Since you won't help me, I won't disturb you farther. Come along, Vandeyk."

Young Vandeyk began at once to expostulate, to entreat, to argue; but the little lawyer cut short the tide of his eloquence.

"Vandeyk, be quiet! Can't you let a gentleman hang himself, if he sees fit? No, I see you can't; it's against your nature. Well, come along; we will see if we can't outwit this would-be suicide, and the hangman, too." And he fairly forces poor, bewildered Ray from the room. Then, turning again toward his uncommunicative client, he says:—

"Oh, I'll attend to that knife business at once, Heath, and let you hear the result."

"Stop a moment, O'Meara. There is one thing I can say, and that is—have the wounds in that body examined at once. As nearly as I could observe, without a closer scrutiny, the knife that killed was not the knife found with the body. It was a smaller, narrower bladed knife; and—if an expert examines that knife, the one found, he will be satisfied that it has never entered any body, animal or human. The point has never been dipped in blood."

"Oh! ho!" cries O'Meara, rubbing his hands together briskly. "So! we are wak-

ing up! why didn't you mention all this before? But there's time enough! time enough yet. I'll have the body examined; and by the best surgeons, sir; and I'll see you to-morrow, early; good evening, Heath."

"I'm blessed if I understand all this," burst out Ray Vandeyk, when they had gained the street. "Here you have kept me with my mouth stopped all through this queer confab. I want a little light on this subject. What the deuce ails Heath, that he won't lift his voice to defend himself? And what the mischief do you let him throw away his best chances for? I never heard of such foolhardiness."

"Young man," retorts the lawyer, with a queer smile upon his face, "just at present I have no use for that tongue of yours. You may be all eyes and ears, the more the better; but I'm going to include you in a very important private consultation; and, don't you open your mouth until somebody asks you to; and then mind you get it open quick enough and wide enough."

(To be Continued.)

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