

The Diamond Coterie

By LAWRENCE M. LYNCH

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(Continued)

CHAPTER XXIX.

It is three o'clock. The rain has ceased falling, but the sky is still gray and threatening. The wind howls dully among the old trees that surround John Burrill's shallow grave, and its weird wall, combined with the rattle and creak of the branches, and the drip, drip of water, dropping from the many crevices into the old cellar, united to form a fitting requiem for an occasion so strange, so uncanny.

Down in the cellar, standing ankle deep in the mud and slime, are the "good men and true," who have been summoned by Justice, to decide upon the manner in which John Burrill met his death. There, too, is the mayor, dignified, grave, and important. The officers of the law are there, and close behind the corner stand the Lamottes, father and son. A little farther back are grouped the witnesses. Those of the morning, the two masons, Mr. O'Meara, Dr. Heath—they are all there except the first and surest one, Prince. There are the men who were Burrill's companions of the night before, reluctant witnesses, ferreted out through the officiousness of one of the saloon habitués, and fearing, a little, to relate their part in the evening's programme, each eager to lighten his own burden of the responsibility at the expense of his comrades in the plot. There are three women and one man, all eye-witnesses to the first meeting between John Burrill and Doctor Heath in Nance Burrill's cottage, and there is Nance Burrill herself. The women stand a little aloof, upon a few boards that have been thrown carelessly down for their comfort. And Nance Burrill talks loudly, and cries as bitterly as if the dead man had been her life's comfort, not its curse.

And there, too, is Raymond Vandeyk. He stands aloof from them all, stands near the ghastly thing that once, not long ago, came between him and all his happiness. There is a strange look in his blue eyes, as they rest upon the lifeless form, from which the coverings have been removed, but which still lies in the shallow place scooped out for it by the hands that struck it from among the living. Under the eyes of them all the dirt has been removed from the broad breast, and two gaping wounds are disclosed; cuts, deep and wide, are made with some broad, heavy weapon, of the dagger species.

When they have all, in turn, examined the body, as it lies, it is lifted out carefully, and placed upon a litter, in the midst of the group, and then all turn their eyes from the shallow grave to the new resting place of its late occupant. Not all; Raymond Vandeyk, still gazing as if fascinated by that hollowed-out bit of earth, starts forward suddenly, then draws shudderingly back, and points to something that lies almost imbedded in the soft soil. Somebody comes forward, examines, and then draws from out the grave, where it has lain, directly upon the body, a knife—a knife of peculiar shape and workmanship—a long, keen, surgeon's knife. There are dark stains upon the blade and handle; and a murmur of horror ruffs through the crowd as it is held aloft to their view.

Raymond Vandeyk draws instinctively away from the grave now, and from the man who still holds the knife; and in so doing he comes nearer the group of women, and catches a sentence that falls from the lips of Nance Burrill.

Suddenly his face flames into anger, and he strides across to where Mr. O'Meara stands.

"O'Meara, what is this that I hear; have they dared accuse Heath?"

"Don't you know, Vandeyk?"

"No; I have heard nothing, save the fact of the murder; the coroner's summons found me at home."

"Heath will be accused, I think."

Raymond Vandeyk turns and goes over to Clifford Heath; without uttering a word, he links his arm within that of the suspected man, and standing thus, listens to the opening of the trial.

The only sign of recognition he receives is a slight pressure of the arm upon which his hand rests; but before Clifford Heath's eyes, just for the moment, there swims a suspicious moisture.

Above them, crowding close about the cellar walls, is a motley throng, curious, eager, expectant; among the faces peering down may be seen that of the portly gentleman; his diamond pin glistening as he turns this way and that; his great coat blown back by the gusts of wind, and a natty umbrella clutched firmly in his plump, gloved hand. Not far distant is private detective Belknap, looking as curious as any, and still nearer the cellar's edge is the rakish book-peddler, supported by his now admiring friend of the morning, who has warmed into a hearty interest in "that fine young fellow, Smith," under the exhilarating influence of the "fine young fellow's" brandy flask.

Dodging about among the spectators, too, is the boy George, who has abandoned his tray of pretty wares, and is making his holiday a feast of horrors. And now all ears are strained to hear the statements of the various witnesses in this strange case.

Frank Lamotte is the first. He is pale and nervous, and he avoids the eyes of all save the ones whom he addresses. Doctor Heath keeps two steady, searching orbs fixed upon his face, but can draw to himself no responsive glance. Frank testifies as follows:—

John Burrill had left Mapleton the evening before at an early hour, not later than eight o'clock. Witness had seen little of him during the day. Deceased was in a state of semi-intoxication when he last saw him. That was at six o'clock, or near that time. No, he did not know the destination of deceased. They seldom went out together. Did not know if Burrill had any enemies. Was not much in his confidence.

Upon being questioned closer, he displays some unwillingness to answer, but finally admits that he has heard Burrill speak in bitter terms of Doctor Heath, seeming to know something concerning the doctor's past life that he, Heath, wished to conceal.

What was the nature of the knowledge? That he cannot tell.

Jasper Lamotte is called. He has been absent from home, and can throw no light upon the subject.

The two masons, one after the other, testify; their statements do not vary.

They were returning home, having turned back from their day's labor, because of the rain. When they came near the old cellar, the barking of a dog attracted their attention. It came from the cellar, and one of them, curious to see what the dog had hunted down, went to look. The dog was tugging at what appeared to be a human foot. He called his companion, and then leaped down into the cellar, and tried to drive the dog from what he now feared was a half buried human being. The other man called for help, and, seeing O'Meara, shouted to him to tell Heath to come and call off his dog.

They tell it all. How Doctor Heath came and mastered the dog, after a hard struggle; how the face of the dead was uncovered, and how Doctor Heath had snatched at the white thing they had taken from off it, scrutinized it for a moment, and then flung it from him. They repeat his words to O'Meara with telling effect; and then they stand aside.

Doctor Heath is sworn. He has nothing to say that has not been said. He knows nothing of the murdered man, save that once he had knocked him down for beating a woman, and once for insulting himself.

Had he ever threatened deceased? He believed that he had on the occasion last mentioned. What was the precise language used? That he could not recall.

Then the handkerchief is produced; is presented to him.

"Doctor Heath, is that yours?" Every man holds his breath; every man is visibly agitated; every man saves the witness. Coolly lifting his hand to his breast pocket, he draws from thence a folded handkerchief; he shakes out the snowy square, and offers it to the coroner.

"It is mine or an exact counterpart of mine. Your honor can compare them."

Astonishment sits on every face. What matchless coolness! what a splendid display of conscious innocence!—or of cool effrontery!

The coroner examines the two pieces of linen long and closely, then he passes them to one of the jurymen; and then they go from hand to hand; and all the while Clifford Heath stands watching the scrutiny. Not eagerly, not even with interest, rather with a bored look, as if he must see something, and with every feature locked in impenetrable calm.

Finally the coroner receives them back. They are precisely alike, and so says his honor:—

"Clifford Heath, do you believe this handkerchief, which I hold in my hand, and which was recently found upon the face of this dead man, to be, or to have been yours?"

"I do," calmly.

"Are you aware that you have recently lost such a handkerchief?"

"I am not."

"Has such a one been stolen from you?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Then you have no idea how your property came where it was this morning found?"

"You are seeking facts, sir, not ideas."

A moment's silence; the coroner takes up the knife.

"Doctor Heath, will you look at this knife?"

The doctor steps promptly forward and receives it from his hand.

"Did you ever see that knife before?"

"I can't say, sir," turning it carelessly in his hands, and examining the spots upon the blade.

"Did you ever see one like it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you ever own one like it?"

sparing himself as much as possible. "We didn't really think he'd go to Doctor Heath's," he says in conclusion. "We all called it a capital joke, and agreed to go out and look him up after a little. He was reeling drunk when he went out, and we all expected to find him floored on the way. After a while, an hour perhaps, we started out, half a dozen of us, with a lantern, and went along the road he had taken; we went almost to Heath's cottage, looking all about the road as we went. When we did not find him, we concluded that he had gone straight home, and that if we staid out longer the laugh would be on us. So we went back, and agreed to say nothing about the matter to Burrill when we should see him."

"How near did you come to Doctor Heath's house?"

"Very near, sir; almost as near as we are now."

"But you were in the opposite direction."

"Just so, sir; we came from the town."

"Did you hear any movements; any sounds of any sort?"

"Nothing particular, sir; we were making some noise ourselves."

"Did you meet any one, either going or coming?"

"No, sir; but a man might easily have passed us in the dark on the other side of the road."

Five men confirm Rooney's statement, and every word weighs like lead against Clifford Heath.

John Burrill left the saloon to go to Doctor Heath's house; in drunken bravado, he would go at night to disturb and annoy the man who had, twice, in public, chastised him, and on both occasions uttered a threat and a warning; unheeding these, he had gone to brave the man who had warned him against an approach—and he has never been seen alive since; he has been found dead, murdered, hidden away near the house of the man who had said: "If he ever should cross my path, rest assured I shall know how to dispose of him."

These words distinctly remembered by all three of the women who witnessed the rescue in Nance Burrill's house, are repeated by each one in turn, and the entire scene is rehearsed.

Nance Burrill is called upon, and just as she comes forward, Mr. Lamotte beckons the coroner, and whispers a few words in his ear. The coroner nods, and returns to his place. Nance Burrill is sworn, and all listen eagerly, expecting to hear her rehearse the story of her life as connected with that of the dead man. But all are doomed to disappointment. She tells the story of the rescue in her cottage, much as did the others; she repeats the words of Clifford Heath, as did the others, and she turns back to her friends, leaving the case against the man who had been her champion, darker than before.

Raymond Vandeyk is called; he does not stir from his position beside his friend, and his face wears a look of defiant stubbornness.

"Ray," says Clifford Heath, quietly, "your silence would be construed against me; go forward and tell the whole truth."

Then he obeys the summons; but the truth has to be drawn from him by hard labor; he will not help them to a single fact. For example:—

"What do you know concerning this case?"

"Nothing," he says, shortly.

"Did you know that man," pointing to the body of Burrill, "in his life?"

"I had not that honor."

"Ah—you have seen him?"

"I believe so," indifferently.

"You can't swear to the fact, then?"

"I knew him better by reputation, than by sight."

The coroner wiggled, uneasily.

"You are a friend to Doctor Heath?"

"I am," promptly.

"Please relate what you know of his difference with Mr. Burrill?"

"What I—know."

"Yes, sir."

"Why, I don't exactly know anything."

"Why, sir, did you not witness a meeting between the two?"

"I—suppose so."

"You suppose?"

"Well, I can't swear that the man I saw knocked down, if that is what you mean, was Burrill; it was night, and I did not see his face clearly."

Lamotte had made a very remarkable choice."

"Mr. Vandeyk," says the coroner severely, "it seems to me that your memory is singularly lucid on some points, and deficient on others of more importance."

"That's a fact, sir," with cheerful humility. "I'm always that way."

"Ah!" with an excess of dignity. "Mr. Vandeyk, I won't tax your memory further."

Ray turns away, looking as if, having done his duty, he might even survive the coroner's frown, and as he moves again to the side of the suspected man, some one in the audience above, a portly gentleman, with a diamond shining in his immaculate breast, makes this mental comment: "There is a witness who has withheld more than he has told." And he registers the name of Raymond Vandeyk upon his memory.

This is the last witness.

While the jurymen stand aside to deliberate, there is a buzz and murmur among the people up above, and profound quiet below. Attention is divided between the gentlemen of the jury and Clifford Heath. The former are very much agitated. They look troubled, uneasy and uncomfortable. They gesticulate rapidly and with a variety of movements that would be ludicrous were the occasion less solemn, the issue less than a man's life and honor.

Finally the verdict is reached, and is pronounced:—

The coroner's jury "find, after due deliberation, that John Burrill came to his death by two daggers, or knife strokes from the hand of Dr. Clifford Heath."

(To be continued.)

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