

THE KING OF DIAMONDS

(Continued from page 3.)

empty stables and warehouses. The keeper of a coffee stall, touched one night by his woe-begone appearance, gave him some half-dried coffee grounds in a paper, together with a handful of crusts.

"Put 'arf that in a pint of water," he said, looking critically at the sodden mess of coffee, "an when it comes to bile let it settle. It'll surprise you to find 'ow grateful an' comfortin' it tastes on a cold night. As for the crusts, if you bake 'em over the fire, they're just as good as the rusk you buy in tins."

This good Samaritan had repeated his gift on two occasions, and Philip had a fairly large supply of small coal sent to his mother by the colliery company, so his position, desperate enough, was yet bearable had he but sought to accustom himself to the new conditions of life. There was a chance that his wild broodings would have yielded to the necessity to earn a living, and that when next a situation was offered to him he would keep it, but the occurrences of this stormy night had utterly shaken him for the hour. He was on the verge of lunacy.

As he passed through the dark archway leading to his abode, the desolate stable yard was fitfully lit by lightning, and in the distance he heard the faint rumble of thunder. The elementary strife was beginning again. This was the second and more disastrous outbreak of the evening of March 19th.

Although wet to the skin he was warm now on account of his long and rapid walk. When he unlocked the door another flash of lightning revealed the dismal interior. He closed and locked the door behind him. On the mantelpiece was a farthing candle and some matches. He groped for them and soon had a light. On other occasions his next task was to light a fire. By sheer force of habit he gathered together some sticks and bits of paper and arranged them in the grate. But the task was irksome to him. It was absurd to seek any degree of comfort for the few minutes he had to live. Better end it at once. Moreover, the storm was sweeping up over the West End with such marvellous speed that the lightning now played through the tiny room with a dazzling brilliancy, and the wretched candle burned with blue and ghost-like feebleness. The cold of the house, too, began to strike chill. He was so exhausted from hunger that if he did not eat soon he would not have the strength left to carry out his dread purpose.

He sprang erect with a mocking little laugh, picked up the candle and the piece of rope, and climbed the stairs. He paused irresolutely at the top, but yielded to overwhelming desire, went on and stood at the side of his mother's bed, where she had died. He fancied he could see her lying there still, with a smile on her wan face and unspoken words of welcome on her lips.

A flood of tears came and he trembled violently. "I am coming to you mother," he murmured. "You told me to trust in God, but I think God has forgotten me. I don't want to live. I want to join you, and then perhaps, God will remember me."

He stooped and kissed the pillow, nestling his face against it, as he went to fondle the dear face that rested there so many weary days. Then he resolutely turned away, descended four steps, of the ladder-like stairs, and tied the clothesline firmly to a hook which he had been driven to the ceiling during the harness-room period of the room beneath. With equal deliberation he knotted the other end of the cord around his neck, and he calculated that by springing from the stairs he would receive sufficient shock to become insensible very quickly, while his feet would dangle several inches above the floor.

There was a terrible coolness, a settled fixity of purpose far beyond his years, in the manner of these final preparations. At last they were completed. He blew out the candle and stood erect.

At that instant the room became absolutely flooded with lightning, not in a single flash, but in a trembling, continuous glare, that suggested the effect of some luminous constellation, fierce with electric energy. Before his eyes was exhibited a startling panorama of the familiar objects of his lonely abode. The brightness, so sustained and tremulous, startled him back from the brink of death.

"I will wait," he said. "When the thunder comes, then I will jump." Even as the thought formed in his mind, a ball of fire, so glowing, so iridescent in its flaming heat that it dominated the electric waves fluttering in the over-burdened air—darted past the little window that looked out over the tiny yard in the rear of the house, and crashed through the flagstones with the din of a ten-inch shell.

Philip, elevated on the stairway, distinctly saw the molten splash that accompanied its impact. He saw the heavy stones riven asunder as if they were tissue paper, and, from the hole caused by the thunderbolt, or meteor came a radiance that sent a spreading shaft of light upward like the beam of a searchlight. The warmth, too, of the object was almost overpowering. Were not the surrounding walls constructed of stone and brick there must

have been an immediate outbreak of fire. As it was, the glass in the windows cracked, and the woodwork began to scorch. In the same instant a dreadful roll of thunder swept over the locality, and a deluge of rain, without any further warning, descended.

All this seemed to the wondering boy to be a very long time in passing. In reality it occupied but very few seconds. People in the distant street could not distinguish the crash of the falling meteor from the accompanying thunder, and the downpour of rain came in the very nick of time to prevent the wood in the house and the neighboring factories from blazing forth in a disastrous fire.

The torrent of water caused a dense volume of steam to generate in the back yard, and this helped to minimize the strange light shooting up from the cavity. There was a loud crackling as the rain poured over the meteor and gradually dulled its brightness. Pandemonium raged in that curiously secluded nook.

Amazed and cowed—not by the natural phenomenon he had witnessed—but by the interpretation he placed on it—the boy unfastened the rope from his neck.

"Very well, mother," he whispered, aloud. "If it is your wish I will live. I suppose that God speaks in this way."

CHAPTER III.

What the Meteor Contained.
Philip descended the stairs. He was almost choked now from another cause than strangulation. The steam pouring in from the fractured window panes was stifling. He took off his coat, first removing from an inner pocket the bundle of letters found under Mrs. Anson's pillow, and carefully stuffed the worn garment into the largest cavities. By this means he succeeded somewhat in shutting out the vapor as well as the lurid light that still flared red in the back yard.

The lightning had ceased totally, and the improvised blind plunged the room into impenetrable darkness. He felt his way to the stairs and found the candle, which he relighted. The rain beating on the roofs and on the outer pavements combined with the weird sounds in the inclosed yard to make a terrifying racket, but it was not likely that a youth who attributed his escape from a loathsome death, self-inflicted, to the direct interposition of Providence in his behalf, would yield to any sentimental fears on that account. Indeed, although quite weak from hunger, he felt an unaccountable elation of spirits, a new-born desire to live and justify his mother's confidence in him, a sense of power to achieve that which hitherto seemed impossible.

He even broke into a desultory whistling as he bent over the hearth and resumed the laying of the fire abandoned five minutes earlier with such sudden soul-weariness. The candle, too, burned with cheery glimmer, as if pleased with the disappearance of its formidable competitor. Fortunately he had some coal in the house—his chief supply was stored in a small bin at the other side of the yard, beyond the burial place of the raging, steaming meteor, and consequently quite unapproachable.

Soon the fire burned merrily, and the coffee-stall keeper's recipe for using coffee grounds was put into practice. Philip had neither sugar nor milk, but the hot liquid smelled well, and he was now so cold and stiff, and he had such an empty sensation where he might have worn a belt, that some crusts of bread, softened by immersion in the dark compound, earned keener appreciation than was ever given in later days to the most costly dishes of famous restaurants yet unbuilt.

After he had eaten, he dried his damp garments and changed his soaked boots for a pair so worn that they scarcely held together. But their dryness was comforting. An odd feeling of contentment, largely induced by the grateful heat of the fire, rendered his actions leisurely. Quite half an hour elapsed before he thought of peeping through the back window to ascertain the progress of external events. The rain was not now pelting down with abnormal fury. It was still falling, but with the quiet persistence that marks—in London parlance—"a genuine wet day." The steam had almost vanished. When he removed his coat from the broken panes he saw with surprise that the flagstones in the yard were dry within a circle of two feet around the hole made by the meteor. Such drops as fell within that area were instantly obliterated, and tiny jets of vapor from the hole itself betrayed the presence of the fiery object beneath.

His boyish curiosity being thoroughly aroused, he drew an old sack over his head and shoulders, unlocked a door which led into the yard from a tiny scullery, and cautiously approached the place where the meteor had placed its way into the ground. The stones were littered with debris, but the velocity of the heavy mass had been so great that a comparatively clean cut was made through the pavement. The air was warm, with the hot breath of an oven, and it was as much as Philip could bear when he stood on the brink of the hole and peeped in. At a good depth, nearly half his own height he estimated, he saw a round ball firmly imbedded in the earth. It was dully red, with its surface all cracks and fissures as the result of the water poured onto it.

Much larger than a football, it seemed to him, at first sight, to be the angry eye of some colossal demon glaring up at him from a dark socket. But the boy was absolutely a stranger to fear. He produced the handle of a mop and prodded the meteor with it, and did not notice the packet of letters lying in the chair. Never before had these documents left his possession. The door was locked and a sharp reminder of the potency of the heat still stored below when the wood burst into sudden flame.

This ended his investigations for the night. He used the sacking to block up the window, replenished the fire, set his coat to dry, and dragged his mattress from the bedroom to the front of the fire. The warmth within and without the house made him intolerably drowsy, and he fell asleep while murmuring his prayers, a practice abandoned since the hour of his mother's death.

In reality, Philip was undergoing a novel sort of Turkish bath, and the perspiration induced thereby probably saved him from a dangerous cold. He slept long and soundly. Long ere the coal in the grate was exhausted, the presence of the meteor had penetrated the surrounding ground, and the house was far above its normal temperature when he awoke.

The sun had risen in a cloudless sky. A lovely spring morning had succeeded a night of gloom and disaster, and the first sound that greeted his wondering ears was the twittering of the busy sparrows on the housetops. Of course he owned neither clock nor watch. These articles, with many others, were represented by a number of pawn tickets stuffed into one of the envelopes of his mother's packet of letters. But the experience of even a few weeks had taught him roughly how to estimate time by the sun, and he guessed the hour to be eight o'clock, or thereabouts.

His first thought was of the meteor. His toilet was that of primeval man, being a mere matter of rising and stretching his stiff limbs. While lacing his boots he noticed that the floor was literally covered with tiny white specks, the largest of which was not bigger than a grain of bird seed. These were the particles which shot through the broken window during the previous night. He picked up a few and examined them. They were hard, angular, cold to the touch, and a dull white in color.

On entering the yard he saw hundreds of these queer little rough pebbles, many of them as large as peas, some the size of marbles and a few bigger ones. They had evidently flown on all sides, but, encountering lofty walls, save where they forced a way through the thin glass of the window, had fallen back to the ground. Interspersed with them he found pieces of broken stone and jagged lumps of material that looked and felt like iron.

By this time the meteor had cooled sufficiently to reveal the nature of the crust. It appeared to be an amalgam of the dark iron-like mineral and the white pebbles. Through one deep fissure he could still see the fiery heat of the thing, and he imagined that when the internal heat had quite exhausted itself the great ball would easily break into pieces, for it was rent in all directions.

His first exclamation was one of thankfulness.

"I am jolly glad that thing didn't fall on my head," he said aloud, forgetting that had its advent been delayed a second or two, the precise locality selected for its impact would not have mattered much to him.

"I wonder what it is," he went on. "Is it worth anything? Perhaps if I dig it out, I may be able to sell it as a curiosity."

A moment's reflection told him, however, that he would not be able to disentangle that day, even if he possessed the requisite implements. On his lower side it was probably still red hot. Through the soles of his boots, broken as they were, he could easily feel the heat of the ground, so the experiment must be deferred for twenty-four hours longer. At any rate, he was sure that his mysterious visitor represented a realizable asset, and the knowledge gave him a sudden distaste for coffee grounds and stale crusts. He resolved to spend his remaining three half pence on a breakfast, and at the same time make some guarded inquiries as to the nature and possible cash value of the meteor itself.

Evidently its fall had attracted no public attention. The fury of the elements and the subsequent heavy rain were effectual safeguards in this respect, and Johnson's Mews, marked out for demolition a fortnight later, were practically deserted now day and night. Philip did not then know that London had already much to talk about in the recorded incidents of two storms. The morning newspapers were hysterical with headlines announcing fires, collapse of buildings, street accidents, and lamentable loss of life in all parts of the metropolis. As the day wore, and full details came to hand, the list of mishaps would be doubled, while scientific observers would begin a nine days' wrangle in the effort to determine the precise reason why the electrical disturbance should have been wholly confined to the metropolitan area. Philip Anson, a ragged boy of fifteen, residing in a desolate nook of the most disheveled district in the East End, possessed the very genesis of the mystery, yet the web of fate was destined to weave a spell that would deftly close his lips.

Meanwhile he wanted his breakfast. He gathered thirty fair-sized pebbles and a few jagged lumps of the iron-like material. These he wrapped in a piece of newspaper, screwed up the small package tightly, and placed it in his trousers' pocket. Thinking deeply about the awesome incidents of the previous night, he donned his coat and did not notice the packet of letters lying in the chair. Never before had these documents left his possession. The door was locked and a sharp reminder of the potency of the heat still stored below when the wood burst into sudden flame.

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Philip produced his white pebble. "What is this?" he said. "The directness of the query again took his hearer aback. Without a word, he bent and examined the stone. Professional instinct mastered all other considerations.

"You must apply to that department," he majestically waved his hand toward a side counter. Philip obeyed silently, and approached a small, elderly personage, a man with clever, kindly eyes, who was submitting to microscopical examinations a number of tiny stones spread out on a chamois leather folding case. He quietly removed the case when his glance rested on the boy.

"Well," he said blankly, wondering why on earth the skilled shop-walker had sent such a direpotential urchin to him. Philip was now quite collected in his wits. He held out the pebble with a more detailed statement.

"I found this," he said. "I thought it might be valuable, and a friend advised me to bring it here. Will you kindly tell me what it is?"

The man behind the counter stared at him for a moment, but he reached over for the stone. Without a word he placed it beneath the microscope and gave it a very brief examination. Then he pressed it against his cheek.

"Where did you get it?" he asked. "I found it where it had fallen on the pavement."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Strange!" was the muttered comment, and Philip began to understand that his meteor possessed attributes hitherto unsuspected.

"But what is it?" he inquired, after a pause.

"A meteoric diamond?"

"Yes."

"Is it worth much?"

"A great deal. Probably some hundreds on pounds."

Philip felt his face growing pale. That dirty white, small stone worth hundreds of pounds! Yet in his pocket he had twenty-nine other specimens, many of them larger than the one chosen haphazard for inspection, and in the back yard of his tenement lay heaps of them, scattered after a shower like hail-stones after a shower, while the meteor itself was a compact mass of them. He became somewhat faint, and leaned against the case that surmounted the counter.

"Is that really true?" was all that he could say.

The expert valuer of diamonds smiled. His first impulse was to send for the police, but he knew that meteoric diamonds did fall to earth occasionally, and he believed the boy's story. And the thing was of such rarity and of such value that the holder must be fully able to account for its possession before he could dispose of it. So his tone was not unkindly as he replied:

"It is quite true, but if you want to ascertain its exact value you should go to a Hatton Garden merchant, and, he, probably, would make you a fair offer. It has to be cut and polished, you know, before it becomes saleable, and I must inform you that most rigid inquiry will be made as to how it came into your hands."

"It fell from heaven," was the wholly unexpected answer, for Philip was shaken and hardly master of his faculties.

"Yes, yes, I know. Personally, I believe you, or you would be in custody at this moment. Take it to Messrs. Isaacstein & Co., Hatton Garden. Say I sent you—Mr. Wilson is my name—and make your best terms with Mr. Isaacstein. He will treat you quite fairly. But, again, be sure and tell the truth, as he'll investigate your story fully before he is satisfied as to its accuracy."

Philip, walking through dreamland, quitted the shop. He mingled with the jostling crowd and drifted into Faringdon Road.

"A diamond—worth hundreds of pounds!" he repeated, mechanically. "Then what is the whole meteor worth and what am I worth?"

CHAPTER IV.

the door of a great jewelry establishment in Ludgate Hill, his face was flushed and his manner eager and animated.

He opened the door, but was rudely brought back to a sense of his surroundings by the suspicious question of a shop-walker.

"Now, boy, what do you want here?"

The unconscious stress in the man's words was certainly borne out by the contrast between Philip, a social pariah in attire, and the wealth of gold and precious stones cut off from him by panes of thick glass and iron bars. What, indeed, did this outcast want there?

Confused by the sudden demand, and no less by its complete obviousness, Philip flushed and stammered:

"I—only wished to obtain some information, sir," he answered.

Like all others, the shopman was amazed by the difference between the boy's smanners and his appearance.

"Information," he repeated in surprise. "What information can we give you?"

The wealth of the firm oppressed this man. He could only speak in accents of adulation where the shop was concerned.

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his pocket, the parcel which had suddenly been endowed with such magic potentialities. It was the instinct to guard a treasure of great value that led to this involuntary action. He was preoccupied, disturbed, vaguely striving to grasp a vision that seemed to elude his exact comprehension.

What did it all mean? Was it really possible that he, Philip Anson, orphaned, beggared, practically a starving tramp, should have the riches of Golconda showered upon him in that mad fashion. If the small stone he had shown to the jeweller was worth hundreds, then some of those in the paper were worth thousands, while as for the stone in the back yard of his house—well, imagination boggled at the effort to appraise it. The thought led to a sense of caution, of reserve, of well-reasoned determination not to reveal his secret to anybody. Perhaps, it would not be best to take Messrs. Isaacstein & Co. into his confidence wholly. He would simply show them the stone he had found and exhibited to Mr. Wilson, and take the best price they offered. Then, with the money in his possession, he could effect a much needed change in his appearance, visit them again, and gradually increase his supply of diamonds until he had obtained more money than he could possibly spend during many years.

Above all else was it necessary that his meteor should be removed to a safer place than Johnson's Mews. Philip had no scruples about appropriating it. Lords of the Manor and Crown rights he had never heard of.

His mother, watching his every action from some Elysian height, had sent the diamond-loaded messenger as a token of her love and care. It was his, and no man should rob him of it. It behooved him to be sparing of explanations and sturdy in defence of his property.

A good deal depended on the forthcoming interview, and he wished he could convert a small fraction in his pocket into a few honest pennies with the king's head on them. The excitement and exercise had made him hungry again. His breakfast was not of ample proportions, and his meals of yesterday had been of the scantiest. It would be well to face the diamond merchants with the easy confidence that springs from a satisfied appetite. Yet, how to manage it? He was sorry, now he had not borrowed a sixpence from O'Brien. The old soldier would certainly have lent it to him. He even thought of returning to the Mile End Road to secure the loan, but he happened to remember that the day was Saturday, and it was probable that the Hatton Garden offices would close early. It was then nearly eleven o'clock and he could not risk the delay of the long, double journey.

At that instant a savory smell wafted to him. He was passing a little restaurant, where sausages and onions sizzled gratefully in large, tin trays, and pork chops lay in inviting prodigality amid rich, brown gravy. The proprietor, a portly and greasy man, with a bald head and side whiskers, was standing at the door exchanging views as to business with his next door neighbor, a green grocer. Philip, bold in the knowledge of his wealth, resolved to try what he could achieve on credit.

He walked up to the pair. "I have not got any money just now," he said to the restaurant keeper, "but if you will let me have some thing to eat I will gladly come back this afternoon and pay you double."

Neither man spoke at first. Philip was always unconscious of the quaint discrepancy between his style of speech and his attire. He used to resent bitterly the astonishment exhibited by strangers, but to-day he was far removed above these considerations, and he backed up his request with a pleasant smile.

The fat man grew apoplectic and turned his eyes to the sky.

"Well, I'm—" he spluttered.

The greengrocer laughed, and Philip blushed.

"Do you refuse?" he said, with his downright manner and direct stare.

"Well, of all the cool cheek—" The stout person's feelings were too much for him. He could find no other words.

"It is a fair offer," persisted the boy. "You don't think I mean to swindle you, surely?"

"Well, there! I never did!"

But the greengrocer intervened. "You're a sharp lad," he guffawed. "D'ye want a job?"

"No," was the short reply. "I want something to eat."

"Dash my buttons, an you're a likely sort of a kid to get it, too. In you go. I'll pas the bill. Lord Lumme, it'll do me good to see you."

"Mr. Judd, are you mad?" demanded his neighbor, whose breath had returned to him.

"Not a bit. The bloomin' kid can't get through a bob's worth if he bursts himself. Ere, I'll bet you two bobs 'e pays up."

"Done! Walk in, sir. We'll you be pleased to 'ave, sir?"

Philip's indignation at the restaurant keeper's sarcasm yielded to his wish to see him annihilated later in the day. Moreover, the sausages really smelt excellently, and he was now ravenous. He entered the shop, and gave his orders with a quiet dignity that astounded the proprietor, who, in the intervals of business, kept peeping at him through the window. Philip ate steadily, and the bill am-

ounted to ninepence, which he paid cheerfully.

The boy held out his hand and said, "Thank you, Mr. Judd, frankly, 'I will return you more than the amount you have lent me, but some day I may be able to render you good service."

Then he walked off toward the next steps, and Mr. Judd looked after him.

"Talks like a little gentleman does. If my little Jimmie would have been just about as good as Lord Lumme, I 'ope the lad's got again, an' not for the sake of a bloomin' ninepence, either oes, mum? Yes'm. Fresh mornin'!"

After crossing Holborn Tube station Philip stood for a little while in the doorway of a motor garage, not that he was interested in the car or the driver, but that he was known to the general public as the boy who had been seen in the back yard of his house—well, imagination boggled at the effort to appraise it. The thought led to a sense of caution, of reserve, of well-reasoned determination not to reveal his secret to anybody. Perhaps, it would not be best to take Messrs. Isaacstein & Co. into his confidence wholly. He would simply show them the stone he had found and exhibited to Mr. Wilson, and take the best price they offered. Then, with the money in his possession, he could effect a much needed change in his appearance, visit them again, and gradually increase his supply of diamonds until he had obtained more money than he could possibly spend during many years.

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