

The King of Diamonds

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Philip smiled as he recalled his boast to Isaacstein. He examined the stone critically, and realized that if it were flawless it must be one of the marvels of creation. Without experiencing any positive motive he slipped this unique specimen into his pocket and went on with the reconstruction of the damaged parcel.

At last he finished. The portmanteau was lying open on the floor, when the thought occurred to him that he might have avoided the flurry and trouble of carrying these heavy articles into the scullery if he had nailed a couple of yards of his druggist across the window.

It was not too late even now to remedy this defect. He glanced at the window to ascertain how much material he should cut off, and saw a face—an evil, brutal, suspicious face—peering at him over the top of the curtain.

CHAPTER IX.

A Decisive Battle.

It would be idle to deny that Philip was startled by the sight. No braver of more resolute boy breathed; but the science, the mystery—the gloomy shadow of Johnson's Mews—lent a sinister aspect to an apparition formidable enough under any circumstances, but absolutely threatening and full of danger to one situated as he at that moment.

He never remembered seeing the man before. Not that this repellent physiognomy was of a type to be soon forgotten. A bullet head, with prominent, bloodshot eyes, a strong, cruel mouth, a huge nose badly broken—a certain strength of character in features debased by drink and crime—these were the tokens which lingered in his mind from without.

They glared at each other for an appreciable time. The man's face wavered from Philip's face to his costume, and then rested on the open portmanteau at the boy's feet. There was in his expression an air of astonishment—a certain gloating bewilderment—as of one who has stumbled upon some object of such potential value that the finder could hardly believe it to be true. He was thinking, wondering, debating with himself. The goggle eyes seemed to see more than the brain was inclined to credit.

Philip, despite his alarm, felt that the right course was to resent this impudent prying into his affairs. "Hello, wot?" he shouted "what do you want?"

The man grinned. He seemed to be about to answer when he suddenly turned his head and looked down the yard toward the entry.

Instantly he swung around and vanished noisily, with the silent alertness of a cat, for the boy heard no sound. He simply disappeared in the darkness, and Philip, who knew every inch of the ground, realized that this most unpleasant-visaged spy had not only slipped into the further obscurity of the mews—which formed a cul-de-sac—but also was either in his stocking feet or was something over his boots to deaden any possible clatter on the paving stones.

There was a nice thing—his habit discovered by some tramp or criminal stalking in the untenanted building started out for the housebreakers within a few days. It was too bad. He was sorely annoyed that he had not thought sooner of the possibilities of illumination by a candle and a ready fire. How long had the man stood there watching him? He had certainly seen portion of the contents of the last portmanteau. Had he also witnessed the removal of the others to the pantry?

Philip's experience as a newspaper vendor told him that all London was now familiar with his personal appearance, as well as the semblance and value of his meteoric diamonds. The white stones, the clumps of iron ore, had been described minutely by clever journalists, who supplemented Isaacstein's clear statements by facts gleaned from encyclopaedia and interviews with geologists.

Most probably this man had read some articles about him, for the story was such as to bring watery curses upon the lips of every penniless vagrant in the kingdom. Indeed, the careful scrutiny bestowed on his face and clothes bore out this suspicion. Had he not changed his garments the porter would have known his identity beyond all question. As it was, the man was puzzled, and disturbed at the very moment he was about to see something. What had happened to cause him to run away. What had seen or heard? Above all, how could he know of Philip and his affairs?

Well, the door was locked, and it

would be folly to go out again that night. The house was absolutely unapproachable save by the front. Philip resolved to remain awake until daybreak. O'Brien's spade stood against the fireplace. It was a formidable weapon, and he would not hesitate to use it if forcible entry was attempted. He must sit quietly in the dark, listening for each sound, and threatening only when he heard anyone endeavoring to open door or window.

He sighed, for he was very tired, but the vigil was imperative.

He dropped the druggist and scissors and bent again over the portmanteau. The packing operations might as well be finished now, and, indeed, when the light was extinguished, it would be better to keep away from the window, through which a sudden thrust with an instrument might do him an injury.

He took his discarded clothes and arranged them on the top of the last parcels of ore and diamonds. Then he reached out for the small bundle of documents resting on the chair beside him, intending to place them in a little pocket in the flap which already covered one-half of the bag.

At that instant he again heard footsteps. Of course, a very few seconds had elapsed since he first caught sight of the living specter without. The ideas recorded at such length whirled through his active brain with lightning speed, just as the knowledge now came that the footsteps proceeded from the entrance to the mews and not from its extremity, while their firm regularity betokened the advent of some person who had no special reason to conceal his movements.

The boy listened breathlessly. The oncomer reached his door, passed it, stopped opposite the window, and then another face peered over the curtain.

This time it was a policeman. For an instant their eyes met in mutual astonishment. The policeman came so close that his helmet rested against a pane of glass. He grinned affably, and cried:

"Here! I want to speak to you." Intuitively grasping the essential fact his best policy was one of ready acquiescence, Philip sprang toward the door and unlocked it. He stood on the step. The constable approached.

"I hope I didn't startle you," he began, "but I just looked in on the off chance."

"I am very glad in deed, to see you," interrupted the boy. "I am leaving here to-morrow. Just now, while I was packing some of my belongings, a very nasty-looking man came and peeped in at me in the same way as you did."

He backed into the house. The policeman half followed him, his quick glance noting the open portmanteau and its array of old clothes.

"Just now?" he questioned. "Do you mean some time since?"

"No, no. Not half a minute—a few seconds ago."

"But where can he be? He hasn't left the mews, or I must have seen him. I crossed the road, and no one came out in so short a time."

"Well, he is somewhere in the place—he had a horrid appearance—a man with a broken nose. He made me jump. I can assure you."

"A man with a broken nose! By jove, I'm looking for a party of that description. A rank wrong 'un. Robbery with violence and a few other little things. What sort of man was he? You saw his face only, I suppose?"

The constable stepped back into the paved court. A rapid twist of his hand sent a vivid beam of light dancing over ruined tenement, dishevelled doorways and shattered windows.

"A tall man," said Philip, "taller than you, for I could see his chin over the string of the curtain. He had a big face, with eyes that stuck out boldly."

"By the Lord, it's Jocky right enough!" cried the constable. "Now, where can he have got to? He's an ugly customer to tackle single-handed," he added, beneath his breath.

"Won't you wait a bit, until I get some help?" said Philip, anxiously.

The man appeared to debate the point. The nearest comrade was an acting sergeant, newly promoted. If he were summoned, the kudus of a smart capture would be his by right of seniority.

"No," announced the constable, stubbornly. "If he is here, I will handle him myself."

Again his lamp swept the small area of the mews and revealed no living object. He quickly fastened his belt, took off his greatcoat, and re-adjusted belt and lamp again.

"Now I'm ready for him," he cried. "Put my coat inside, boy, and stand at the door yourself with the

candle in your hand. If you see anything yell out to me."

Philip obeyed. These preparations for a deadly struggle appealed to his very soul, for your healthy-minded boy of fifteen has generally ceased to be a highwayman or a pirate in imagination, and aims rather at planting the Union Jack on a glacis bristling with hostile cannon.

The policeman, feeling for the loose strap of his truncheon, commenced a careful survey of the mews. He had not gone five yards when there was a loud crash of broken glass. The building at the other end of the yard possessed a couple of windows facing in to another enclosure at the back. Obviously, the broken-paned "Jocky," unseen himself, had observed the constable's movements.

Realizing that discovery was imminent, he was effecting a strategic movement to the rear.

The policeman instantly abandoned his cautious tactics. He ran toward the door of the house whence the sound came. It resisted somewhat, but yielded to his shoulder. He disappeared inside. Philip, after closing his own door, also ran to the new centre of interest, shielding the candle with one hand lest it should blow out.

Quick as he was, he missed the first phase of a Homeric combat. The violent "Jocky," foiled by an unnoticed iron bar in his attempt to escape, turned like a madman on the policeman. There was no sort of parley between them. Cursing the luck that had revealed his hiding place, the man, an ex-convict, with the frame of a giant, sprang at his pursuer suddenly from an inner room.

Th policeman had a second's warning. It was something, but not enough to give him an advantage. He got his truncheon out, but simultaneously his assailant was on him with the ferocity of a catamount. They closed in bone-breaking endeavor, and before they were locked together for ten fearful seconds the officer of the law bitterly regretted the professional pride which sent him single-handed into this unequal strife.

For he was physically outclassed, and he knew it, and there is no more unerring knowledge can come to a man at such a supreme moment. Nevertheless, he was a brave man, and he fought with all the resolution that is born of the consciousness of justice and moral right. But Providence is on the side of big battalions, and "Jocky" was taller, heavier, very much more active. Moreover liberty is as potent as law any day, and law was being steadily throttled when the pale gleam of Philip's candle lit up the confines of the ruinous hovel about which the two men stamped and tumbled and wrestled.

At the precise moment of the boy's entrance the policeman's knees yielded and he fell, with his remorseless antagonist uppermost. Philip gazing at them almost wide-eyed, almost fell too, for his left foot rolled on the constable's staff.

Being fashioned of the stuff which founds empires—the principle that instant action is worth a century of diplomacy—he picked up the truncheon and brought it down on "Jocky's" hard skull with such emphasis that the convict emitted a queer sort of cough, and collapsed limply on top of his conquered adversary.

Then the boy was horrified. The two lay so still that he imagined both were dead. It is one thing to help the law, but quite another to kill a man. He did not want to be a murderer as well as a millionaire, not knowing then the qualities which go to form these varieties of the genus homo are strangely alike.

He gazed at them as in a trance, but relief came when he heard them breathing sonorously. At last, after a pause that apparently endured unnumbered minutes, the constable weakly rolled himself free from the bulky form of his would-be-slayer, and sat up.

He inflated his lungs vigorously. Then he managed to gasp: "Thank you! You saved my life!"

He pressed his ribs with both hands and gingerly felt his throat. He stood up. His lamp was still alight, but a quantity of oil had run over his tunic and trousers.

"By jove, boy, you are a brick," he said, and his voice was under control again.

Philip answered not a word; his eyes were glued on the prostrate form of Jocky. The policeman understood his fear and laughed.

"Don't you worry about him. He'll do a stretch all right. I would have given him a harder one than that if I got a swing at him."

His words were quickly justified. The fallen man growled unintelligibly and moved. With a rapidity born of much practice the officer handcuffed him. There must have been some sense of familiarity in the touch of the steel bracelets, for the recipient of this delicate attention stirred uneasily.

"You knocked him silly," grinned the policeman, "but he'll get his wits back in a minute or two. Can you bring him a drink of water? It won't do me any harm, either."

Philip hurried away to comply with this request. His mind was relieved now, and with the backward swing of the mental pendulum came the reflection that the least said is the soonest mended.

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He filled a small in at the scullery tap and ran with it to the scene of the capture. The constable was gently shaking his prize and addressing him by name.

"Jocky! Jocky Mason! Pull yourself together. This way for the Old Bailey!"

"If you please," said Philip, "I would be greatly obliged were my name not mentioned at all with reference to this affair."

The policeman, whose senses were normal again, was instantly impressed by the boy's grand manner. His accent was that of the men of the University Mission. And how many boys of his age would have struck so straight and truly at a critical moment!

"Well, don't you see that will be rather difficult," was the answer. "It was you who told me where he was, and the man himself knows that without somebody's help I could not have arrested him. There is no need to mince matters. I have to thank you for not being laid out stiff."

Philip said no more. To press his request implied a powerful motive. The stars in their courses must have conspired that day to supply with excitement.

Mason eagerly gulped the water held to his lips. Then he tried to raise his right hand to his head. Ah! He understood. A flood of oaths began to meander thickly from his mouth.

"No, thanks," he managed to say, though the effort to speak calmly took away his remaining breath. "I am only taking it to the shop there."

The man glanced at the shop—it was a marine store dealer's—a place where lead and iron and brass found ready sale. He passed on.

"Be the forchun ov war, Phil, where did ye get the iligant leather thrunks, an' phwat's in them?" inquired the astonished pensioner.

The boy bravely called a smile to his aid. "I have a big story to tell you one of these days, Mr. O'Brien, but I have no time to-night. These things will not be in your way until the morning?"

"The divil a bit. If things go on as they are, there'll soon be room enough in the poor ould shop. To think, at all these years, that a murdherin' thief in the War Office—"

Philip was safe. He rapidly helped his friend to put up the shutters, and rushed back to No. 3. Even yet he was not quite prepared for eventualities. He ran upstairs and gathered a few articles belonging to his mother, articles he never endeavored to sell even when pinched by hunger.

Th last dress she wore, her boots, a hat, an album with photographs, some toilet accessories from the tiny dressing table, the cozelet of the bed on which she died—these and kindred mementoes made a very credible bulk in the denuded portmanteau.

He gave one glance at the hole in the back yard as he went to the coal house for a fresh supply of coal. That must remain. It probably would not be seen. In any case it remained inexplicable.

He was stirring the fire when a tap sounded on the door, and the policeman entered, followed by an inspector.

day? Would mother inspire him again as she had not failed to do during so many strange events? Would her spirit guide his footsteps across this new quicksand on whose verge he hesitated?

A few doors to the left was O'Brien's shop. The old man crept into sight, staggering under the weight of a shutter. Good gracious! Why had he not thought of this alley sooner? Some precious minutes were wasted already.

"Arrah, Phil, phwat in the worruld?"

"Wait just the little bit, Mr. O'Brien. I have some portmanteaux that I want to store for the night. Do let me put them at the back of your shop. My place is not very safe, you know."

"Sure, boy, that's a shmall thing to ax. Bring 'em an welcome."

With the speed of a deer Philip dove into the mews. He carried the two lesser bags without extraordinary difficulty, and deposited them behind O'Brien's counter. The third was almost too much for him, as the weight was all in one hand. But he got it there, breathless with the exertion.

He had to open the fourth and tear out the stuffing of paper. When filled with the packages taken from the fifth it was beyond his power to lift it. So he dragged it bodily along the mews and into the shop.

A passer-by offered to help him. "No, thanks," he managed to say, though the effort to speak calmly took away his remaining breath. "I am only taking it to the shop there."

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CHAPTER X.

A Step Higher.

"This is the boy, sir," said the policeman.

"Oh, is that him?" observed the inspector, sticking his thumbs into his belt and gazing at Philip with professional severity.

Philip met his scrutiny without finching. He leaned against the wall with his hands in his pockets, one fist clinched over the pouchful of gold, the other guarding a diamond bigger than the Koh-i-Noor.

"I am sorry I have only one chair, gentlemen," he said, apologetically.

"That's all right, my lad," said the inspector. "The constable here tells me that you very pluckily helped him to capture a notorious burglar. The man was hiding in these mews, and it seems you first saw him looking in through your window. What were you doing at the time?"

"Packing my portmanteau."

"Oh, packing your portmanteau."

"Yes. That is it."

He stooped and nonchalantly threw it open. His clothes and boots, and some of the other contents, were exposed to view. The inspector laughed.

"Not many diamonds there, Bradley."

"No, sir. I told you Mason was talking rubbish."

"Did he say any more about me being the boy who found the meteor?" asked Philip, with a first-rate attempt at a grin.

"Wouldn't talk of anything else," volunteered P. C. Bradley.

"Judging by the way he dropped when I hit him, I expect he saw stars," said Philip.

The inspector's glance roved from the serviceable portmanteau to Philip's tidy garments, and it was his business to make rapid deductions.

"Yes, most fortunately."

"Anybody connected with Sharpe & Smith?" the constable put in.

"Sharpe & Smith! Who are they?" "Don't you know? The young man certainly didn't seem to know much about your movements. He has been here twice looking for you. The first time was, let me see, last Monday, about four o'clock. I was on duty in the main road and he asked me for some information. We came and looked in, but your door was locked. The man on this beat this afternoon told me that the same clerk was making further enquiries to-day, so as I came on night duty I strolled into the mews to find out if you were at home. That is how I happened to see you."

He turned toward the inspector. "He was packing his bag at that moment, sir, and Mason had evidently footsteps in the arch."

The inspector pursed out his under lip. "The whole thing is perfectly clear," he said. "Boy, have you got a watch?"

"No," said Philip, surprised by this odd question.

"Bradley, he hasn't got a watch," observed the inspector. He again addressed Philip.

"Where are you going to-morrow?" "I am not quite sure, but by address will be known to Mrs. Wrigley, the James Street Laundry, Shepherd's Bush."

"Ah! The constable says you do not want to be mixed up in the arrest of Mason. There is no need for you to appear in court, but—er—in such cases as yours, the—er—police like to show their—er—appreciation of your services. That is so, Bradley, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. If it hadn't been for him I shouldn't be here now. Jocky had me fairly cornered."

"You had no time to summon assistance?"

"I barely heard he was here, before the window was smashed, and I knew he was trying to get out the other way. You heard him, Anson?"

Philip looked the policeman squarely in the eyes.

"You had just taken off your great coat when the glass cracked," he said. Police Constable Bradley stooped to pick up his coat. He did not wish this portion of the night's proceedings to be described too minutely. In moving the garment he disturbed the packet of letters. Instantly Philip recalled the names of the solicitors mentioned by the constable.

"You said that a clerk from Messrs. Sharpe & Smith called to see me twice," he asked.

He picked out one of the letters, opened it, and made certain of his facts before he cried angrily: "Then I want to have nothing whatever to do with them. They treated my mother shamefully."

The inspector had sharp eyes. "What is the date of that letter?" he inquired.

"January 18th of this year."

"And what are those—pawm tickets?"

"Yes, some of my mother's jewelry and dresses. Her wedding ring was the last to go. Most of them are out of date but I intend to—I will try to save some of them, especially her wedding ring."

Jocky Mason's romance was now into thin air. The contents of the portmanteau, the squalid appearance of the house, the date of the solicitor's letter, the bundle of pawm tickets, offered conclusive evidence to the inspector's matter-of-fact mind that the ex-convict's story was the effect of a truncheon rapidly applied to a brain excited by the newspaper comments on a sensational yarn about some boy who had found a parcel of diamonds.

This youngster had not been favored by any such extraordinary piece of luck. Simple chance had led him to put the police on the track of a much wanted scoundrel, and he had very bravely prevented a member of the force from being badly worsted in the ensuing encounter.

A subscription would be made among the officers and men of the division, and they would give him a silver watch, with a suitable inscription.

The inspector noted the address given by Philip. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask his christian name, when the constable suggested that they should examine the stable in which Mason had hidden.

They went up the mews. Philip locked his door, extinguished the candle, and lay down on the mattress, fully dressed, with his newly bought rug for covering.

He was so utterly tired, so exhausted physically and mentally by the storm and stress of this eventful day, that he was sound asleep when the two men returned.

They saw him through a window. "He's a fine lad," said the inspector, thoughtfully. "I wonder what he is going to make of himself. We might have asked him who his friends were, but they are not badly off, or he couldn't have got that bag and his new clothes. What on earth caused Mason to connect him with that diamond story?"

"It's hard to say," observed the constable.

"I will look around and have a chat with him in the morning. Poor, lit-

tle chap! He's sleeping like a top now."

The inspector called at No. 3, Johnson's Mews soon after ten next morning, but the door was locked and the bird flown. He spoke to Mason after that worthy was remanded for a week, but a night's painful seclusion had sealed the burglar's lips. He vowed, with fearful emphasis, to "get even" with the kid who "sighted" him, for the policeman's evidence had revealed the truth concerning the arrest. But not another word would Mason say about the diamonds, and for a little while the inspector placed his overnight revelations in the category of myths familiar to the police in their daily dealings with criminals.

Philip awoke shortly before seven. He was cold and stiff. The weather was chilly, and there was no ardent meteor in the back yard to keep the temperature of the house at a grateful point during the night.

But his active, young frame quickly dissipated the effects of a deep sleep on a draughty floor. He washed his face and hands at the sink in the scullery, and his next thought was for breakfast, a proof, if proof were needed that he arose refreshed in mind and body.

In the Mile End Road there are plenty of early morning restaurants. At one of them he made a substantial meal, and, on his return to the mews, he lost not a moment in carrying out a systematic search through all parts of the house and yard for any traces of the meteor which might have escaped his ken in the darkness.

Amidst the earth and broken stones of the excavation there were a few fragments of ore and some atomic specimens of the diamondiferous material—not sufficient, all told, to fill the palm of the hand. But he gathered them for obvious reasons, and then devoted five vigorous minutes with O'Brien's spade to the task of filling up the deep hole itself.

By lowering the flagstones and breaking the earth beneath, he soon gave the small yard an appearance of chaos which might certainly puzzle people, but which would afford no possible clue to the nature of the disturbing element.

At best they might imagine that the dread evidence of some weird crime lay in the unbroken area. If so, they could dig until they were tired. But, indeed, he was now guarding against a most unlikely hypothesis. The probability was that Johnson's Mews would cease to trouble him, for Philip was quite sure the whole power of the law would be invoked to prevent him from dealing with his meteor if once the exact place where it fell became publicly known.

O'Brien's shop was scarcely open before Philip was there with his remaining portmanteau.

"Arrah, Phil, me bhoy, where in the name of goodness