

The KING of DIAMONDS.

By Louis Tracy,
Author of "Wings of the Morning," "The Pillar of Light," Etc.

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CHAPTER III.

PHILIP descended the stairs. He was almost choking now from another cause than strangulation. The steam pouring in through 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 cavity. By this means he succeeded somewhat in shutting out the vapor as well as the lurid light that still dared 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 still-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 plowed 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 dull 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 procured the handle of a mop and prodded the meteor with it. The surface felt hard and brittle. Large sections broke away, though they did not crumble, and he received 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 sack 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 had 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. There was no need to attend to the fire. Long ere the coal in the grate was exhausted

the presence of the meteor had penetrated the surrounding earth, 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 bundle 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 8 o'clock or thereabouts.

His first thought was of the meteor. His toilet was that of a primitive man, being a mere matter of rising and stretching his stiff limbs. While lacing his boots he noticed that the door was littered 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, cold to the touch and a dull white 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 itself had cooled sufficiently to reveal the nature of its outer crust. It appeared to be an amalgam of the dark ironlike mineral and the white pebbles. Through one deep fissure he could still see the fiery heart 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



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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 disinter it that day, even if he possessed the requisite implements. On its 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, perhaps 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 halfpence 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 the 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 disreputable 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, white pebbles and a few jagged lumps of the ironlike 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 the key in his pocket before he missed them. It was in his mind to turn back. In another second he would have obeyed the impulse had not a mighty gust of wind swept through the yard and carried his tattered cap into the passage. That settled it. Philip ran after his headgear and so was blown into a strange sea of events.

"They are quite safe there," he thought. "In any case, it will be best not to carry them about in future. They get so frayed, and some day I may want them."

Emerging from the haven of the Mews, he found the untidy life of the Mile End road eddying in restless confusion through a gale. The gaunt, high walls surrounding his secluded dwelling had sheltered him from the blustering March wind that was now drying the streets and creating much ill temper in the hearts of carters, stall owners and girls with large hats and full skirts. In a word, everything that could be flapped or shaken or rudely swept anywhere out of its rightful place was dealt with accordingly. In one instance a heavy tarpaulin was lifted clean off a wagon and neatly lodged over the heads of the driver and horses of a passing omnibus. They were not extricated from its close embrace without some difficulty and a great quantity of severe yet cogent remarks by the wagoner and the driver, assisted by the bus conductor and various passengers.

Philip laughed heartily for the first time since his mother's death. He waited until the driver and the wagoner had exchanged their farewell compliments; then he made off briskly toward an establishment where three halfpence would purchase a cup of coffee and a bun.

In ten minutes he felt much refreshed, and his busy mind reverted to the mysterious package he carried. Thinking it best to seek the counsel of an older head, he went to O'Brien's shop. The old man was taking down the shutters and found the task none too easy. Without a word Philip helped him, and soon the pensioner was wiping his spectacles in the shelter of the shop.

"I dunno what the weather is comin' to at all at all," he grumbled. "Last night was like the takin' uv the Redan, an' this mornin' reminds me uv crossin' the bay o' Biscay."

"It certainly was a fearful thunderstorm," said Philip.

"Faix, boy, that's a throe word. It was just like old times in the hills in Injia, where the devil himself holds court some nights. But what's the matter? Didn't you get that job?"

Philip laughed again. "I am not sure yet," he replied. "I really came in to ask you what this is."

With his hand in his pocket, he had unwrapped the paper and taken out a white pebble, which he now handed to O'Brien.

The old man took it, smelt it and adjusted his glasses for a critical examination.

"It ain't alum," he announced.

"No, I think not."

"An' it ain't glass."

"Probably not."

"Where did yer get it?"

"I found it lying on the pavement."

O'Brien scratched his head. "'Tis a queer looking object, anyhow. What good is it?"

"I cannot tell you. I thought that possibly it might have some value."

"What! A scrap of white stone like that. Arrah, what's come over ye?"

"There is no harm in asking, is there? Some one should be able to tell me what it is made of."

Philip from his small store of physical geography knew that meteors were articles of sufficient rarity to attract attention, and he was tenacious withal.

"I suppose that a jeweler would be the best man to judge. He must understand about stones," he went on.

"Maybe. But I don't see what's the use. 'Tis a sheer waste of time. But if ye're set on findin' out go to a big man. These German Jews round about here are omadhauns. They don't know a watch from a clock, an' if they did they'd hate ye."

"I never thought of that, yet I ought to know by this time. Thank you. I will go into the city."

He took the pebble, which he placed in his waistcoat pocket. Walking briskly, he traversed some part of the sorrowful journey of barely twelve hours earlier. What had happened to change his mood he did not know and scarcely troubled to inquire. Last night he hurried through these streets in a frenzied quest for death. Now he strode along full of hope, joyous in the confidence of life and youth. His one dominant thought was that his mother had protected him, had snatched him from the dark gate of eternity. Oddly enough, he laid far more stress on his escape from the meteor than on the accident that prevented his contemplated suicide. This latter idea had vanished with the madness that induc-

ed it. Philip was sane again, morally and mentally. He was keenly anxious to justify his mother's trust in him. The blustering wind, annoying to most wayfarers, only aroused in him a spirit of resistance, of fortitude. He breast-ed it so manfully that when at last he paused at 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 shopwalker:

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

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

"Information?" he repeated in his 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.

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 microscopic examination a number of tiny stones spread out on a chamol's 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 shopwalker had sent such a disreputable 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 that 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."

"A meteoric diamond?"

"Yes."

"Is it worth much?"

"A great deal. Probably some hundreds of 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 much larger than the one chosen haphazard for inspection, and in the back yard of his tenement lay heaps of them, scattered about the pavement like hailstones after a shower, while the meteor itself was a compact mass of them. He became somewhat faint and leaned against the glass 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. Moreover, the thing was such a 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, most probably, would make you a fair offer. It has to be cut and polished, you know, before it becomes salable, and I must warn 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 will 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?"

[TO BE CONTINUED]

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