

Tracy Louis

The King of Diamonds: A Tale of Mystery and Adventure



Louis Tracy

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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	11
CHAPTER III	16
CHAPTER IV	21
CHAPTER V	27
CHAPTER VI	33
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	36

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CHAPTER I

No. 3, Johnson's Mews

"Is there no hope, doctor?"

"Absolutely none – now."

"If she had gone to the – the workhouse infirmary – would she have lived?"

The doctor paused. The gulp before that hateful word was not lost on him. He tried professional severity, and bestowed some care on the buttoning of a glove.

"I am surprised," he said, "that an excellent woman like your mother should encourage your feelings of – er – repugnance toward – er – Confound it, boy, have you no relatives or friends?"

"No, sir. We are alone in the world."

"And hard up, eh?"

The boy dug a hand into a pocket with the stolid indifference of despair. He produced two shillings and some pennies. He picked out the silver, and the man reddened in protest.

"Don't be stupid, Philip. That is your name, is it not? When I want my fee I will ask for it. Your mother needs a nurse, wine, chicken broth. You are old enough to realize that a doctor practicing in a neighborhood like this might want such things himself and whistle for them. But in the – er – infirmary they are provided by the State."

"Would my mother have lived had she consented to be taken there a month ago?"

Again the man wondered at the stony persistence of the questioner, a fearless-looking, active boy of fifteen, attired in worn clothes too small for him, and wearing an old pair of boots several sizes too large. The strong, young face, pinched with vigils and privation, the large, earnest eyes, heavy with unshed tears, the lips, quivering in their resolute compression over a chin that indicated great strength of character, appealed far more to the doctor than the whimpering terror with which the children of the poor usually meet the grim vision of death.

The wrestle with the glove ceased and a kindly hand rested on Philip's shoulder.

"No," came the quiet answer. "May God help you, she would not have lived."

"God does not help anybody," was the amazing retort.

The doctor was shocked, visibly so.

"That is a foolish and wicked statement," he said, sternly. "Do not let your mother hear such awful words. She has lived and will die a true Christian. I have never met a woman of greater natural charm and real piety. She has suffered so much that she merits the life eternal. It is a reward, not a punishment. Cast away these terrible thoughts; go, rather, and kneel by her side in prayer."

For an instant the great brown eyes blazed fiercely at him.

"Am I to pray that my mother shall be taken from me?"

"Even that, if it be God's will."

The gleam of passion yielded to utter helplessness. The boy again brought forth his tiny store of money.

"Surely," he said, "I can buy some small amount of wine. In the shops they sell things in tins that make chicken broth, don't they? I have a fire and a kettle. Would you mind telling me – "

"There, there! You go to your mother, and endeavor to cheer her up. I will see what I can do. What! Would you argue with me? Go at once; I insist. Listen, she is calling for you!"

In that poor tenement there were no secrets. A rickety staircase, crudely built against the retaining wall of the only living room on the ground floor, led steeply to an apartment above, and culminated in an opening that suggested a trapdoor. The walls, roughly paneled, were well provided with shelves and pegs. The back door was fastened with a latch, a contrivance rarely seen in the London of to-day. The front window looked out into a badly-paved court girt by tumbledown stables. A smaller window at the back revealed a dismal yard darkened by lofty walls. Although little more than a stone's throw removed from the busy Mile End Road, the place was singularly quiet. It was already dead, and only waited the coming of men with pickaxes and crowbars to sweep away the ruins.

The boy heard his name whispered rather than spoken. The sound galvanized him into vivid consciousness.

"Doctor," he said, earnestly, "you will come back?"

"Yes, yes; within half an hour. Tell your mother to expect me."

Philip ran up the stairs. Long practice had enabled him to move with a minimum of noise. It was pitiful to see the manner in which he emerged, with stealthy activity, into the creaking loft above. Here, at first glance, there was an astonishing degree of comfort. Odd pieces of worn carpet, neatly joined, covered the floor. The two windows, facing only to the front of the dwelling, were curtained. The whitewashed walls were almost hidden by cuttings from the colored periodicals published during the previous Christmas season. A screen divided the room into two compartments, each containing a tiny bed. On one of these, propped up with pillows, lay the wasted figure of a woman over whose face the shadows were falling fast. The extreme thinness, the waxen pallor, the delicate texture of debilitated skin and unnatural brilliancy of the eyes, gave her a remarkably youthful appearance. This fantastic trick of death in life accentuated the resemblance between mother and son. The boy, too, was sharply outlined by hunger, and, in the fading light of a March day, the difference between the dread tokens of approaching collapse and the transient effects of a scanty regimen on a vigorous youth was not readily distinguishable.

"Do you want anything, mother dear?" said the boy, laying his hand tenderly on the clammy forehead.

"Only to ask you, Phil, what it was that the doctor told you."

The voice was low and sweet – the diction that of an educated woman. The boy, too, though his tones were strong and harsh, spoke with the accent of good breeding. His manner and words gained some distinction from a slight touch of French elegance and precision. This was only noticeable in repose. When excited, or moved to deep feeling, the Continental veneer acquired at the Lycée in Dieppe instantly vanished, and he became the strenuous, emphatic Briton he undoubtedly was by birth and breeding.

"He said, dearest, that what you wanted was some good wine – nice things to eat. He is an awfully fine chap, and I am afraid I was rude to him, but he didn't seem to mind it a bit, and he is coming back soon with chicken broth and port wine, and I don't know what."

His brave words were well meant, but the mother's heart understood him too well to be deceived. A thin hand caught his wrist and feebly drew him nearer.

"You say you were rude to him, Phil? How can that be possible? What did you say or do to warrant such a description?"

He hesitated for a moment. With rare self-control in one so young, he fiercely determined not to communicate his own despair to his mother. So he laughed gently.

"We are so jolly hard up, you know, and it sounded strange in my ears to talk about expensive luxuries which I could not buy. He has often told us, dear, that you would be better cared for in the infirmary. I am afraid now he was right, only we couldn't bear – to be parted. Could we, mother?"

Not all his valor could control his tremulous lips. A beautiful smile illumined the face of the invalid.

"So you are trying to hoodwink me, Phil, for the first time. I know what the doctor said. He told you that I could not recover, and that I had not long to live; in a word, that I am dying."

Then the boy gave way utterly. He flung himself down by the side of the bed and buried his face in the coverlet.

"Oh, mother, mother!" he wailed, and his passionate sobs burst forth with alarming vehemence. The poor woman vainly strove to soothe him. She could not move, being paralyzed, but her fingers twined gently in his hair, and she gasped, brokenly:

"Phil, darling, don't make it harder for me. Oh, calm yourself, my dear one, if only for my sake. I have so much to say to you, and perhaps so little time. Be strong, Philip. Be strong and brave, and all will be well with you. I know you will miss me – we have been all in all to each other since your father's death. But my memory must be sweet, not bitter to you. When you think of me I want the recollection to inspire you to do that which is right regardless of consequences, to strive always for honor and for the approbation of your own conscience. My own dear boy, we must bow to the will of God. We have indeed been sorely tried, you far more than I, for I can look back on years of perfect happiness with a loving husband and a delightful child, whereas you have been plunged into poverty and misery at an age when life should be opening before you with every promise of a successful career. Perhaps, Phil, your trials have come to you early, as mine have found me late. I trust I have borne reverses of health and fortune with patience and resignation. My present sufferings will be a lasting joy to me if, in the life to come, I can know that my example has been a stimulus to you amidst the chances and changes of your career. Promise me, darling, that you will resign yourself to the decrees of Providence even in the bitter hour of our parting."

Her voice failed. Tears stood in her eyes. The knowledge came to her anew that natural emotions can at times conquer all restraints. The maternity strong within her clamored for the power to shield her offspring from the dangers that would beset him. There was a maddening pain in the thought that a few brief hours or minutes might unclasp her arms from him forever.

It was Phil who first gave utterance to the wild protest in their souls.

"Mother," he mourned, bitterly, "I don't want to live without you. Let us die together. If you cannot stay with me, then I swear –"

But a scream of terror, so shrill and vehement that it seemed to be almost miraculous from so frail a form, froze the vow on his lips.

"Phil! What are you saying? Oh, my son, my son, do not break my heart before I die. Kiss me, dearest. I am cold. I can scarce see you. Come nearer. Let me look once more into your brave eyes. You will be a great man, Phil. I know it. Who should know your character like your mother? But you must have faith in God always. I have prayed for you, and my prayers will surely be granted. I will watch over you. If you are in danger my spirit will come back to you across the void. We cannot be parted. Oh, God, it is impossible! You are the life of my life. I am not dead while you still live."

Even as she spoke, her left hand and arm, hitherto untouched by the cruel blight which had made her a helpless invalid during many weary months, became numb and rigid. She was dying now, not with the struggle against the king of terrors which often marks the passing of humanity, but with a slow torpidity more akin to sleep.

Her brain was clear, but the stock of nervous force had sunk so low that her few remaining words were spoken with difficulty. They were mostly endearing expressions, appeals to her loved one to hope and pray, to trust steadfastly in the all-wise power that would direct his destiny. With the last flicker of existence the maternal instinct became dominant again and she asked him not to forget her.

The boy could only murmur agonized appeals to the merciless unseen not to rob him of the only being he held dear on earth, but even in that awful moment he had the strength to cease his frantic protests when they seemed to cause her pain, and he forced himself to join her in prayer.

When the doctor brought a nurse and some small store of the much-needed delicacies, Mrs. Anson was already unconscious.

The boy, aroused from frenzy by the steps on the stairs, shrieked incoherently:

"I have killed my mother. See! She is dead. I killed her. I made her cry. You told me to look after her until you returned. She cried and screamed because I spoke so wildly. It is all my fault. I – "

"Hush! Your mother is not dead, but dying. Not all the skill of man can save her. Let her die in peace."

No other words could have checked the wild torrent of lament that surged from that wounded heart. So she still lived. There remained a faint flicker of life. Not yet had she passed the dreadful barrier of eternity. Through his blinding tears he thought he could discern a smile on the worn face. The doctor watched Phil more narrowly than the sunken frame on the bed. It was best that the paroxysm of grief should go untrammelled. The nurse, a young woman unused as yet to the inevitableness of death, moved timidly toward the windows and adjusted the curtains to admit more light.

At last, when Phil's strength yielded to the strain of his sorrow and the very force of his agony had spent itself, the doctor leaned over the inanimate form and looked into the eyes.

"It has ended, Phil," he whispered. "Your mother is in heaven!"

In heaven! What a tocsin of woe in a message of faith! The boy suddenly stood up. Hope was murdered within him. His tears ceased and his labored breathing came under control with a mighty effort. He stooped and kissed the pale cheeks twice.

"Good-by, mother," he said, and the dull pain in his voice was so heartrending that the nurse's sympathies mastered her. She burst out crying. Professional instinct came to the doctor's aid. He sharply reprimanded the half-hysterical woman and sent her off on an errand to bring those whose duty it is to render the last services to frail mortality. The boy he led downstairs. He was a busy man, with many claims on his time, but this strange youngster interested him, and he resolved to turn the boy's thoughts forcibly away from the all-absorbing horror of his mother's death.

"Have you a tumbler or a cup?" he said, sharply.

Phil handed him a tumbler. The doctor poured out some wine taken from the nurse's basket, soaked a piece of bread in the liquor, and gave it to the boy with an imperative command to eat it instantly.

Somewhat to his surprise, he was obeyed. While Phil was devouring the food of which he stood so greatly in need, the doctor reviewed the circumstances of this poverty-stricken household so far as they were known to him. Mr. and Mrs. Anson had occupied a fairly good position in Dieppe, where Philip's father was the agent of an old-established London firm of coal shippers. About two years earlier, both husband and wife were seriously injured in a motor car accident. Mr. Anson sustained concussion of the brain, and practically never regained his senses, though he lingered for some weeks and was subjected to two operations. Mrs. Anson's spine was damaged, with the result that she changed from a bright and vigorous woman into a decrepit invalid doomed to early death from slow paralysis.

When the great expenses attendant on these mishaps were paid, she found herself not only absolutely poor, but rendered incapable of the slightest effort to turn her many and varied talents to account in order to earn a livelihood. She came to London, where her late husband's employers generously gave her rent-free possession of the tenement in which she was lying dead, helped her with funds to furnish it modestly, and found a clerkship for Philip with a promise of early promotion.

But the cup of sorrow is seldom left half filled. Barely had the widow settled down to a hopeful struggle on behalf of her beloved son than a quarrel between partners led to the sale of the firm's business to a limited liability company. Economies were effected to make way for salaried directors. Philip was dismissed, with several other junior employees, and the stable yard was marked out as a suitable site for the storage of coal required by the local factories.

This development took place early in the New Year, and the new company allowed Mrs. Anson to occupy her tiny abode until the last day of March. It was now March 5th, and how the widow and

her son had lived during the past two months the doctor could only guess from the gradual depletion of their little store of furniture.

It was odd that such an intelligent and well-bred woman should be so completely shut off from the rest of the world, and his first question to Phil sought to determine this mystery.

"Surely," he said, "there is some one to whom you can appeal for help. Your father and mother must have had some relatives – even distant cousins – and, if they are written to, a friendly hand may be forthcoming."

Philip shook his head. The mere taste of food had provoked a ravenous appetite. He could not eat fast enough. The doctor stayed him.

"Better wait a couple of hours, Phil, and then you can tackle a hearty meal. That's the thing. I like to see such prompt obedience, but you certainly have wonderful self-control for one so young. I may tell you, to relieve present anxieties, that a few employees of your father's firm have guaranteed the expenses of your mother's funeral, and they also gave me a sovereign to tide you over the next few days."

Funeral! The word struck with sledge-hammer force. Phil had not thought of that. He remembered the dismal pomp of such events in this squalid locality, the loud sobbing of women, the hard-faced agony of men, the frightened curiosity of children. His mother, so dear, so tender, so soft-cheeked – the bright, beautiful, laughing woman of their life in Dieppe – to be taken away from him forever, and permitted to fade slowly into nothingness in some dreadful place, hidden from the sunshine and the flowers she loved! For the first time he understood death. When his father was killed his mother was left. Anxious tending on her dispelled the horror of the greater tragedy. Now all was lost. The tears that he hated were welling forth again, and he savagely bit his lip.

"You have been – very good – to us, doctor," he forced himself to say. "If ever – I can repay you –"

"There, there, not a word! Bless my soul, yours is a difficult case."

Again the doctor tackled his glove. He glanced at his watch.

"Four o'clock! I am an hour late on my rounds. No, Phil. Don't go upstairs. There are some women coming. Wait until they have tended your mother. And – one last word. It will do you no good to keep vigil by her side. Best think of her as living, not dead. You will be grateful for my advice in after life."

The women arrived, coarse but kindly-hearted creatures. One of them gave the boy a packet of letters.

"I found 'em under the dear lydy's pillow," she said. Neither poverty nor death robbed Mrs. Anson of the respect paid to her by all who came in contact with her.

He sat down, untied a string which bound the letters together, and looked at the address on the first envelope. It bore his mother's name and a recent postmark. Wondering dolefully what correspondence she could have had during these later months that demanded such careful preservation, he took out the letter. Suddenly he hesitated. Perhaps these documents alluded to something which his mother did not wish him to know. For an instant his impulse was to consign the packet to the fire. No; that might be wrong. He would glance at their general purport and then commit them to the flames if he thought fit.

The letter in his hand was headed: "The Hall, Beltham, Devon," and dated about a month earlier. It read:

"Dear Madam: I am requested by Sir Philip Morland to ask you not to trouble him with further correspondence. This is the fourth time I have been desired by

him to write in these terms, so please note that your letters will in future remain unanswered.

"Yours truly,

"Louisa Morland."

The curt incivility of the note brought an angry flush to the boy's face. Who was Sir Philip Morland that he should dare to offer this insult to a lady? Evidently a relative, and a near one, for Morland was his mother's name, and his own Christian name suggested a family connection. Yet she had never spoken of any such person.

Three other letters, of preceding dates, showed that "Louisa Morland" kept accurate reckoning. There were half a dozen more, from a firm of solicitors. Some of these were merely formal acknowledgments of letters received and forwarded, but one stated that they "were instructed by Lady Morland to inform Mrs. Anson that Sir Philip Morland declined either to see or hear from her."

That was all. Philip sprang up with face aflame. He was alone in the house now, alone with his dead mother.

He went upstairs, with the letters crushed in his right hand as though he would choke a reptile which had stung the only being he loved. He bent over the shrunken form, so placid, so resigned, so angelic in the peace of death, and his hot tears fell unchecked.

"You poor darling," he murmured, "I believe you humbled yourself even to beg from these people for my sake. What can I do to show my love for you?"

CHAPTER II

On the Edge of the Precipice

On Friday evening, March 19th, a thunderstorm of unusual violence broke over London. It was notably peculiar in certain of its aspects. The weather was cold and showery, a typical day of the March equinox. Under such conditions barometric pressure remains fixed rather than variable, yet many whose business or hobby it is to record such facts observed a rapid shrinkage of the mercury column between the hours of six and seven. A deluge of rain fell for many minutes, and was followed, about 7.30 P. M., by a mad turmoil of thunder and an astounding electrical display not often witnessed beyond the confines of the giant mountain ranges of the world.

So violent and unnerving was the outburst that the social life of London was paralyzed for the hour. Theater parties, diners in the fashionable restaurants, the greater millions anxious to get away from offices and shops, those eager alike to enter and leave the charmed circle of the four-mile radius, were ruthlessly bidden to wait while the awesome forces of nature made mad racket in the streets. All horseflesh was afraid. The drivers of cabs and omnibuses were unable to make progress. They had sufficient ado to restrain their maddened animals from adding the havoc of blind charges through the streets to the general confusion caused by the warring elements. Telegraph and telephone wires became not only useless but dangerous, and the suburban train service was consequently plunged into a tangle from which it was not extricated until midnight.

So general was the confusion, so widespread the public alarm, that the sudden cessation of the uproar at eight o'clock caused more prayers of thankfulness to be uttered in the metropolis than had been heard for many a day. But worse remained. Thus far the lightning had been appalling, brilliantly lurid, but harmless. At ten o'clock the storm raged again, this time without the preliminary downfall of rain, and the lightning, though less sensational in appearance, was demoniac in effect, levying a toll on human lives, causing fires and general damage to property, accounts of which filled many columns of the newspapers next morning. This second outburst was succeeded by heavy and continuous rain. At the hour when the theaters emptied their diminishing audiences into the streets London wore its normal rain-sodden aspect. It was not until the following day that people fully understood the magnitude and terrifying results of the later display.

About a quarter to eight, while the first storm was at its height, a carriage and pair dashed into a fashionable West End square and pulled up outside a mansion cast in the stereotyped mold of the early Victorian period. The horses, overfed and underworked, had been rendered frantic by the drive through the park from the further west. Fortunately, they knew this halting place, or the coachman would never have succeeded in stopping them. As it was, they sweated white with fear, and the footman, shouting to the occupants of the carriage that he could not attend to the door, ran to their heads after giving a vigorous tug at the house bell.

A boy, tall and thin, and scantily attired for such weather, who had taken shelter in the dark portico of the mansion, ran forward to offer his services at the carriage door. A bundle of evening papers, covered with a piece of sacking, somewhat impeded the use of his left hand, and, as it happened, in his right he held a large bun on which he had just commenced to dine.

Before he could turn the handle the carriage door opened from the inside. A man sprang out.

"Get out of the way," he said, impatiently, and the newsboy obeyed, glad that he had not followed his first impulse and flung away the bun.

A vivid flash of lightning made the horses rear and plunge.

"Look sharp, Elf," cried the stranger, in no more cordial tone. "Gather your wraps and jump out. On a night like this these nervous brutes – "

A peal of thunder that rattled the windows interrupted him. The two animals reared and backed with one accord. The plucky footman, hanging onto the crossbars of the bits, was lifted off his feet and banged violently against the pole. He was forced to let go, and fell, staggering backward some yards before he dropped. There was a smash of iron and wood, and the near hind wheel of the carriage jammed against the curb. A slight scream came from the interior. Certain that the vehicle would turn over instantly, the man who had alighted slammed the door and sprang clear. In doing so he tripped over the newsboy and fell heavily on the pavement. The boy, quicker to note that the breaking of the pole had given a momentary respite, rushed into the roadway, throwing away both precious bun and still more precious stock of unsold papers.

He wrenched the other door open, and shouted:

"This way, madam! Quick!"

"Madam" was quick. She sprang right into his arms, and proved to be a girl of twelve or thereabouts, dressed all in white, and wrapped in an ermine cloak.

Over went the carriage with a fearful crash. The coachman managed to jump from the box into the roadway. He retained the reins and whip in his grasp, and now, losing his temper, lashed the struggling horses savagely. This cowed them, and they ceased their antics.

The boy and the girl found themselves standing on the sidewalk, close to the ruined vehicle.

"You have saved my life!" said the girl, sweetly, and without any trace of the nervousness which might naturally be expected after such a narrow escape from a serious accident.

The boy noted that her eyes were large and blue, that she wore a great shining ornament in her hair, and that she appeared to be dressed in somewhat fanciful manner, though the big cloak she wore concealed the details.

The door of the mansion opened, and servants came running out.

Suddenly the boy received a violent blow on the side of the head.

"Confound you!" shouted the man who had fallen on the pavement, "why didn't you get out of the way when I told you?"

The boy, astounded by such recognition of his timely help, made no reply, but the girl protested vehemently.

"Oh, uncle," she cried, "why did you strike him? He got me out of the carriage just before it turned over. He did, indeed!"

Another vivid flash of lightning illumined the scene. It lit up the group with starling brilliancy. The boy, still somewhat shaken by the vicious blow, was nevertheless able to see clearly the pale, handsome, but dissipated features of his enraged assailant, whose evening dress and immaculate linen were soiled by the black mud of the pavement. The girl, dainty and fairy-like, a little maid of aristocratic type, and of a beauty that promised much in later years, was distressed now and almost tearful.

Through the crowd of frightened servants, augmented by a few daring pedestrians, a burly policeman, gigantic in waterproof overalls, was advancing with official bluster.

"What has happened?" he demanded. "Is anybody hurt?"

The man answered:

"My horses were startled by the storm. I jumped out and was endeavoring to extricate my niece when this wretched boy got in the way."

"Uncle," protested the girl, "you closed the door on me, and the boy –"

"Shut up!" he growled, curtly. "Go inside the house!"

But his niece shared with him at least one characteristic. She possessed the family temper.

"I will not go away and let you say things which are untrue. Listen to me, Mr. Policeman. Lord Vanstone did close the door because he thought the carriage would turn over on top of him. For some reason the accident did not happen immediately, and the boy ran round to the other side and helped me out just in time."

"Confound the brat! I think he was the real cause of the whole affair. Why was he hiding in my doorway?"

Lord Vanstone was more enraged than ever by the girl's obstinate defense of her rescuer and her insistence on his own seeming cowardice.

"I was not hiding. I only took shelter from the storm. I tried to help you because the footman was struggling with the horses. I do not claim any credit for simply opening a door and helping the young lady to alight, but I lost both my dinner and my papers in doing so."

Everyone experienced a shock of surprise at hearing the boy's elegant diction. The policeman was puzzled. He instantly understood the facts, but dared not browbeat an earl.

"You do not bring any charge against him, my lord?" he said.

But his lordship deigned no reply. He told the coachman to arrange for the removal of the carriage, grasped his niece by the arm and led her, still protesting, into the house.

The policeman saw the bundle of papers scattered over the roadway, and, near them, the partly-eaten bun. After a wrench at his garments he produced a penny.

"Here," he said to the boy. "Buy another bun and be off. It's a good job for you the young lady spoke up the way she did."

"She merely told the truth. That man was a liar."

Refusing the proffered penny, the boy turned on his heel. The policeman looked after him.

"That's a queer kid," he thought. "Talked like a regular young gent. I wonder why he is selling papers. Poor lad! He lost a bob's worth at least, and small thanks he got for it."

Passing out of the square by the first eastward street, Philip Anson, with his head erect and hands clinched in his pockets, strode onward at a rapid pace. The lightning was less frequent now, and the thunder was dying away in sullen rumblings. He was wet and hungry. Yet, although he had three halfpence, the remaining balance of the only sales effected that evening, he passed many shops where he could have bought food.

In Piccadilly, where the cessation of the storm created a rush of traffic, he was nearly run over, by reason of his own carelessness, and received a slash from a whip, accompanied by a loud oath from an angry cabman. He shivered, but never even looked around. Crossing Trafalgar Square, he plunged through the vortex of vehicles without troubling to avoid them in the slightest degree. Once the hot breath of a pair of van horses touched his cheek while a speechless driver pulled them back onto their haunches. Again, the off-wheel of an omnibus actually grazed his heel as he sped behind the statue of Charles the First.

At last he reached the comparative seclusion of the Embankment, and stood for a moment to gaze fixedly at the swirling, glinting river.

"Not here," he muttered, aloud. "I must be nearer to mother – dear old mother! She is there, waiting for me."

He trudged steadily away, through Queen Victoria Street, Cornhill, Leadenhall Street, and so on to Johnson's Mews, in the Mile End Road. Pausing at a marine store dealer's shop, kept by an army pensioner, an Irishman, with whom he had a slight acquaintance, he entered. An elderly man was laboriously reading a paper of the preceding day's date.

"Good-evening, Mr. O'Brien," he said. "Can you oblige me with a piece of rope? I want a strong piece, about three or four yards in length. I can only spare three halfpence."

"Faix, I dunno. They use nails on the crates mostly nowadays. If I have a bit it's at yer sarvice. I wouldn't be afther chargin' the likes o' you."

Philip's story was known in that humble locality, and the old soldier sympathized with the boy. "He has rale spunk an' no mistake," was his verdict when others said Philip was proud and overbearing. O'Brien moved rheumatically about the squalid shop. At last he found some portion of a clothesline.

"Will that do?" he inquired.

Philip tested it with vigorous pulling against his knee.

"Excellently," he said. "Let me pay you for it."

"Arrah, go away wid ye. And, be the powers, isn't the poor lad cowl'd an' famished. Luke here, now. In five minutes I'm goin' to have a cup o' tay –"

"I am awfully obliged to you, but I could not touch a morsel. I am in a hurry."

"Are ye goin' a journey? Have ye got a job?"

"I think so. It looks like a permanency. Good-by."

"Good-by, an' good luck to ye. Sure the boy looks mighty quare. 'Tis grief for his mother has turned his head entirely."

No words could more clearly express Philip's condition than this friendly summing up. Since his mother's burial he had been half demented. His curt, disconnected answers had lost him two places as an errand boy, which he could easily have secured. His small stock of money, ridiculously depleted by the generosity with which he met the open hints of the undertaker's assistants, barely sufficed to keep him in food for a week. Then he sought employment, but with such stiff upper lip and haughty indifference to success that he unknowingly turned those against him who would have assisted him.

For two days he was chosen to act as van boy for a parcel delivery firm. He earned a few meals, but in a fit of aberration induced by the sight of a lady who was dressed in a costume similar to one he remembered his mother wearing at Dieppe, he allowed a ham to be stolen from the rear of the van. This procured his instant dismissal, with threats. Then he sold newspapers, only to find that every good site was jealously guarded by a gang of roughs who mercilessly bullied any newcomer. Personal strength and courage were unavailing against sheer numbers. His face was still swollen and his ribs sore as the result of being knocked down and kicked at Ludgate Circus; at Charing Cross next day he was hustled under the wheels of an omnibus and narrowly escaped death. So he was driven into the side streets and the quiet squares, in which, during three or four days, he managed to earn an average of eightpence daily, which he spent on food.

Each night he crept back to the poor tenement in Johnson's Mews, his bleak "home" amidst the solitude of 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 soddened mess of coffee, "an' when it comes to a 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 rusks 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 elemental 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 were 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 East End with such marvelous

speed that the lightning now played through the tiny room with dazzling brilliancy, and the wretched candle burned with blue and ghostlike feebleness. The cold of the house, too, began to strike chilly. 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, yielding to overwhelming desire, went on and stood at the side of the bed on which his mother 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 was wont 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 had been driven into the ceiling during the harness-room period of the room beneath. With equal deliberation he knotted the other end of the cord round 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 vivid 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 very 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 which 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 a very few seconds. People in the distant street could not distinguish the crash of the fallen 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 into 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 mad hissing and 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 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 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 plowed its way into the ground. The stones were littered with débris, 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 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 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 had 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. 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 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 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, 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 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 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 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, 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 ould times in the hills in Injia, where the devil himself holds coort 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 untwisted the paper and taken out the white pebbles, 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 lyin' on the pavement."

O'Brien scratched his head. "'Tis a quare-looking objec', anyhow. What good is it?"

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

"What! A scrap of white shtone 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 y'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 chate 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 induced 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 breasted 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 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 – 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 microscopical examination 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 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 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 Farringdon Road.

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

CHAPTER IV

Isaacstein

The keen, strong, March wind soon blew the clouds from his brain. He did not hurry toward Hatton Garden. He sauntered, rather, with his right hand clinched on the tiny parcel in 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 this mad fashion. If the small stone he had shown to the jeweler were 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 begot a sense of caution, of reserve, of well-reasoned determination not to reveal his secret to anybody. Perhaps it would be best not to take Messrs. Isaacstein & Co. wholly into his confidence. He would simply show them the stone he had 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 defense of his property.

A good deal depended on the forthcoming interview, and he wished he could convert a small fraction of the wealth 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 was wafted to him. He was passing a small 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 bald head and side whiskers, was standing at the door exchanging views as to business with his next-door neighbor, a greengrocer. 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 something 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 by 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 kid to get it, too. In you go. I'll pay 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 of it. The bloomin' kid can't get through a bob's worth if he bursts himself. 'Ere, I'll bet you two bob 'e pays up."

"Done! Walk in, sir. Wot'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 and hugely delighted the greengrocer, who, in the intervals of business, kept peeping at him through the window. Philip ate steadily, and the bill amounted to ninepence, which his ally paid cheerfully.

The boy held out his hand.

"Thank you, Mr. Judd," he said, frankly. "I will return without fail. I will not insult you by offering more than the amount you have advanced for me, but some day I may be able to render you good service in repayment."

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

"Talks like a little gentleman, 'e does. If my little Jimmie 'ad lived 'e would ha' bin just about his age. Lord lumme, I 'ope the lad turns up again, an' not for the sake of the bloomin' ninepence, neither. Tomatoes, mum? Yes'm. Fresh in this mornin'."

After crossing Holborn Viaduct, Philip stood for a little while gazing into the showroom of a motor agency. It was not that he was interested in Panhard or De Dion cars – then but little known to the general public in England – but rather that he wished to rehearse carefully the program to be followed with Mr. Isaacstein. With a sagacity unlooked for in one of his years, he decided that the meteor should not be mentioned at all. Of course, the diamond merchant would instantly recognize the stone as a meteoric diamond, and would demand its earthly pedigree. Philip resolved to adhere to the simple statement that it was his own property, and that any reasonable inquiry might be made in all quarters where meteoric diamonds were obtainable as to whether or not such a stone was missing. Meanwhile he would obtain from Mr. Isaacstein a receipt acknowledging its custody and a small advance of money, far below its real worth, leaving the completion of the transaction until a later date. The question of giving or withholding his address if it were asked for was a difficult one to settle offhand. Perhaps the course of events would permit him to keep Johnson's Mews altogether out of the record, and a more reputable habitation would be provided once he had the requisite funds.

Thinking he had successfully tackled all the problems that would demand solution, Philip wasted no more time. He entered Hatton Garden, and had not gone past many of its dingy houses until he saw a large, brass plate, bearing the legend: "Isaacstein & Co., Diamond Merchants, Kimberley, Amsterdam and London."

He entered the office and was instantly confronted by a big-nosed youth, who surveyed him through a grille with an arched opening in it to admit letters and small parcels.

"Is Mr. Isaacstein in?" said Philip.

"Oah, yess," grinned the other.

"Will you kindly tell him I wish to see him?"

"Oah, yess." There was a joke lurking somewhere in the atmosphere, but the young Hebrew had not caught its drift yet. The gaunt and unkempt visitor was evidently burlesquing the accent of such gentle people as came to the office on business.

Philip waited a few seconds. The boy behind the grille filled in the interval by copying an address into the stamp book.

"Why do you not tell Mr. Isaacstein I am here?" he said at last.

"Oah, yess. You vil be funny, eh?" The other smirked over the hidden humor of the situation, and Philip understood that if he would see the great man of the firm he must adopt a more emphatic tone.

"I had better warn you that Mr. Wilson, of Messrs. Grant & Sons, Ludgate Hill, sent me here to see Mr. Isaacstein. Am I to go back to Mr. Wilson and say that the office boy refuses to admit me?"

There was a sting in the description, coming from such a speaker.

"Look 'ere," was the angry retort. "Go away und blay, vil you? I'm pizzy."

Then Philip reached quickly through the little arch, grabbed a handful of shirt, tie and waistcoat, and dragged the big nose and thick lips violently against the wires of the grille.

"Will you do what I ask, or shall I try and pull you through?" he said, quietly.

But the boy's ready yell brought two clerks running, and a door was thrown open. Phil released his opponent and instantly explained his action. One of the clerks, an elderly man, looked a little deeper than the boy's ragged garments, and the mention of Mr. Wilson's name procured him a hearing. Moreover, he had previous experience of the youthful janitor's methods.

With a cuff on the ear, this injured personage was bidden to go upstairs and say that Mr. Wilson had sent a boy to see Mr. Isaacstein. The added insult came when he was compelled to usher Philip to a waiting room.

Soon a clerk entered. He was visibly astonished by the appearance of Mr. Wilson's messenger, and so was Mr. Isaacstein, when Philip was paraded before him in a spacious apartment, filled with glass cases and tables, at which several assistants were seated.

"What the deuce – " he began, but checked himself. "What does Mr. Wilson want?" he went on. Evidently his Ludgate Hill acquaintance was useful to Philip.

"He wants nothing, sir," said Philip. "He sent me to you on a matter of business. It is of a private nature. Can you give me a few minutes alone?"

Isaacstein was a big-headed, big-shouldered man, tapering to a small point at his feet. He looked absurdly like a top, and surprise or emotion of any sort caused him to sway gently. He swayed now, and every clerk looked up, expecting him to fall bodily onto the urchin with the refined utterance who had dared to penetrate into the potentate's office with such a request.

Kimberley, Amsterdam and London combined to lend effect to Isaacstein's wit when he said:

"Is this a joke?"

All the clerks guffawed in chorus. Fortunately, Isaacstein was in a good humor. He had just purchased a pearl for two hundred and fifty pounds, which he would sell to Lady Somebody for eight hundred pounds, to match another in an earring.

"It appears to be," said Philip, when the merriment had subsided.

For some reason the boy's grave, earnest eyes conquered the big little man's amused scrutiny.

"Now, boy, be quick. What is it?" he said, testily, and every clerk bent to his task.

"I have told you, sir. I wish to have a few minutes' conversation with you with regard to business of an important nature."

"You say Mr. Wilson sent you – Mr. Wilson, of Grant & Sons?"

"Yes, sir."

Isaacstein yielded to amazed curiosity.

"Step in here," he said, and led the way to his private office, surprising himself as well as his assistants by this concession.

Philip closed the door, and Isaacstein turned sharply at the sound, but the boy gave him no time to frame a question.

"I want you to buy this," he said, handing over the diamond.

Isaacstein took it, and gave it one critical glance. He began to wobble again.

"Do you mean to say Mr. Wilson sent you to dispose of this stone to me?" he demanded.

"Not exactly, sir. I showed it to him, and he recommended me to come to you."

"Ah, I see. Sit down, there –" indicating a chair near the door. The diamond merchant himself sat at his desk, but they were both in full view of each other.

"Where did you get it?" he asked.

"I found it."

"Quite so. But where?"

"At this moment I do not wish to go into details, but it is mine, mine only, and I am quite willing that you should make every inquiry to satisfy yourself that it was not stolen. I suppose that is what you fear?"

Sheer wonder kept the Jew silent for a space.

"Do you know its value?" he said, with a sudden snap.

"Mr. Wilson told me it was worth several hundreds of pounds."

"Did he, really?"

"Yes. He said you would treat me quite fairly, so I wish you to advance me a few pounds until you have decided upon its real price. You see, sir, I am very poor, and my present appearance creates an unfavorable impression. Still, I am telling you the absolute truth, and I show my confidence in you and in my own case by offering to leave the diamond with you on your receipt, together with a small sum of money."

Philip thought he was getting on very well. Isaacstein's large eyes bulged at him, and speech came but slowly. He leaned forward and rummaged among some papers. Then he opened a drawer and produced a magnifying glass, with which he focused the diamond.

"Yes, it is worth six or seven hundred pounds," he announced, "but it will be some time before I can speak accurately as to its value. I think it may be flawless, but that can only be determined when it is cut."

Philip's heart throbbed when he heard the estimate.

"Then I can have a few pounds –" he commenced.

"Steady. You are not in such a hurry; eh? You won't tell me where you got it?"

"I may, later, if you continue to deal with me as honestly as you have done already."

Isaacstein moved on his seat. Even in a chair he wanted to wobble. There was a slight pause.

"Have you any more like this stone? I suppose not, eh?"

"Yes, I have many more."

"Eh? What? Boy, do you know what you are saying?"

"No doubt you are surprised, sir, but not more than I am myself. Yet, it is true. I have some – as big again."

Philip, in his eagerness, nearly forgot his resolution to advance slowly. How the diamond merchant would shake if only he could see some of the white pebbles in the meteor.

"As big again! Where are they?"

The chair was creaking now with the rhythmic swaying of its occupant.

"Where this one came from, Mr. Isaacstein."

Philip smiled. He could not tell how it happened, but he felt that he was the intellectual superior of the man who sat there glowering at him so intently. Already the boy began to grasp dimly the reality of the power which enormous wealth would give him. Such people as the Jew and his satellites

would be mere automata in the affairs of his life, important enough in a sense, with the importance of a stamp for a letter or a railway ticket for a journey, but governed and controlled utterly by the greater personage who could unlock the door of the treasure house. For the first time, Philip wished he was older, bigger, more experienced. He even found himself beginning to wonder what he should do until he reached man's estate. He sighed.

Isaacstein was watching him closely, trying to solve the puzzle by the aid of each trick and dodge known in a trade which lends itself to acute roguery of every description. The look of unconscious anxiety, of mental weariness, on Philip's face, seemed to clear away his doubts. He chuckled thickly.

"How many, now," he murmured. "Ten, twenty – of assorted sizes, eh?"

"Far more! Far more! Be content with what I tell you to-day, Mr. Isaacstein. I said my business was important. When you are better acquainted with me, I think you will find it sufficiently valuable to occupy the whole of your time."

Philip was ever on the verge of bursting out into confidences. His secret was too vast, too overpowering for a boy of fifteen. He wanted the knowledge and the trust of an older man. He did not realize that the Jew, beginning by regarding him as a thief, was now veering round to the opinion that he was a lunatic. For it is known to most men that the values of diamonds increase out of all proportion to their weight. While a one-carat stone is worth, roughly speaking, ten pounds, a twenty-carat gem of the same purity is worth any sum beyond two thousand pounds, and the diamond Philip had submitted for inspection would probably cut into ten or twelve carats of fine luster. To speak, therefore, of an abundance of larger and finer stones, was a simple absurdity. The De Beers Company alone could use such a figure of speech, and even then only at isolated dates in its history.

The boy, with his eyes steadfastly fixed on the Jew's face and yet with a distant expression in them that paid slight heed to the waves of emotion exhibited by the heavy cheeks and pursed-up mouth, awaited some final utterance on the part of his questioner. Surely he had said sufficient to make this man keenly alive to the commercial value of the "business" he offered. Under the conditions, Isaacstein could not refuse to give him sufficient money to meet his immediate wants.

The Jew, seemingly at a loss for words, bent again over the stone. He was scrutinizing it closely when a heavy tread crossed the outer showroom and the door was flung open.

A policeman entered, and Isaacstein bounced out of his chair.

"I have sent for you, constable, to take this boy into custody," he cried, excitedly. "He came here ten minutes ago and offered for sale a very valuable diamond, so rare, and worth so much, that he must have stolen it."

Philip, too, sprang up.

"It is a lie!" he shouted. "How dare you say such a thing when I have told you that it is mine!"

The policeman collared him by the shoulder.

"Steady, my young spark," he said. "Mr. Isaacstein knows what he is about, and I don't suppose he is very far wrong this time. Do you know the boy, sir?" he went on.

Isaacstein gave a voluble and accurate summary of Philip's statements. Each moment the policeman's grip became firmer. Evidently the boy was the mere agent of a gang of thieves, though it was beyond comprehension that anyone short of an idiot should choose an emissary with broken boots and ragged clothing in order to effect a deal with the leading house in Hatton Garden.

Philip listened to the recital in dumb agony. His face was deathly pale, and his eyes glowed with the rage and shame that filled his soul. So the Jew had been playing with him, merely fooling him until some secret signal by an electric bell had sent a messenger flying for the police. His dream of wealth would end in the jail, his fairy oasis would be a felon's cell. Very well, be it so. If he could help it, not all the policemen in London should rend his secret from him. With a sudden glow of fiery satisfaction, he remembered that his clothing contained no clue to his address, and he had not given his name either at Ludgate Hill or Hatton Garden. How long could they keep him a prisoner? Would others find his meteor and rob him of his mother's gift? In less than a fortnight men would come

to tear down the buildings in Johnson's Mews. Well, it mattered not. The courage of despair which nerved him the previous night came to his aid again. He would defy them all, careless of consequence.

The policeman was saying:

"It's a queer affair, sir. Did he really say he had lots more of 'em?"

"Yes, yes! Do you think I am romancing? Perhaps they are in his possession now."

"Have you any more of these stones, boy?"

Philip, with lips tensely set, was desperately cool again. He moved his arm, and the constable's grasp tightened.

"You are hurting me," said the boy. "I merely wish to put my hand in my pocket. Are you afraid of me, that you hold me so fast?"

The policeman, like the rest, did not fail to notice Philip's diction. The scornful superiority of his words, the challenge of the final question, took him aback. He relaxed his grip and grinned confusedly.

Philip instantly produced his paper of diamonds and opened it widely, so that all the stones could be seen. He handed the parcel to the policeman.

"Take good care of them, constable," he said. "Judging from results, they would not be safe in that man's hands."

But Isaacstein did not hear the insult. When he saw the collection he nearly lost his senses. What had he done? Was he or the boy mad? Veins stood out on his forehead, and he wobbled so fearfully that he clutched the desk for support. A scarecrow of a boy wandering about London with thousands of pounds' worth of diamonds in his pocket, wrapped up in a piece of newspaper like so many sweets! There were not any meteoric diamonds of such value in all the museums and private collections in the world. He began to perspire. Even the policeman was astounded, quite as much at being called "constable" by Philip as by the mean appearance of articles presumably of great value.

"This is a rum go. What do you make of it, Mr. Isaacstein?" he said.

The query restored the Jew's wits. After all, here was the law speaking. It would have been the wildest folly for a man of his position to dabble in this mysterious transaction.

With a great effort he forced himself to speak.

"Lock him up instantly. This matter must be fully inquired into. And do be careful of that parcel, constable. Where do you take him? To the Bridewell station? I will follow you in a cab in five minutes."

So Philip, handcuffed, was marched down the stairs past the gratified office boy and out into the street.

As for Isaacstein, he required brandy, and not a little, before he felt able to follow.

CHAPTER V

Perplexing a Magistrate

In after years Philip never forgot the shame of that march through the staring streets. The everlasting idlers of London's busiest thoroughfares gathered around the policeman and his prisoner with grinning callousness.

"Wot's 'e bin a-doin' of?"

"Nicked a lydy's purse, eh?"

"Naw! Bin ticklin' the till, more like."

"Bli-me, don't 'e look sick!"

They ran and buzzed around him like wasps, stinging most bitterly with coarse words and coarser laughter. An omnibus slowed its pace to let them cross the road, and Philip knew that the people on top craned their necks to have a good look at him. When nearing the viaduct steps, the policeman growled something at the pursuing crowd. Another constable strode rapidly to the entrance and cut off the loafers, sternly advising them to find some other destination. But the respite was a brief one. The pair reached Farringdon Street, and had barely attracted attention before they passed the restaurant where Philip had lunched. The hour was yet early for mid-day customers, and the bald-headed proprietor saw them coming. He rushed out. The greengrocer, too, turned from his wares and joined in the exclamations of his friend at this speedy *dénouement* of the trivial incident of twenty minutes earlier.

The restaurant keeper was made jubilant by this dramatic vindication of the accuracy of his judgment.

"The thievin' young scamp!" he ejaculated. "That's right, Mr. Policeman. Lock 'im up. 'E's a reg'lar wrong 'un."

The constable stopped. "Hello!" he said. "Do you know him?"

"I should think I did. 'E kem 'ere just now an' obtained a good blowout on false pretencies, an' –"

"Old 'ard," put in the greengrocer, "that's not quite the ticket. 'E asked you to trust 'im, but you wouldn't."

The stout man gurgled.

"Not me. I know 'is sort. But 'e 'ad you a fair treat, Billy."

"Mebbe, an' mebbe not. Ennyhow, two bob won't break me, an' I'm sorry for the kid. Wot's 'e done, Mr. Policeman?" Mr. Judd was nettled, yet unwilling to acknowledge he was wholly wrong.

"Stole a heap of diamonds. Do either of you know him?"

"Never saw him afore this mornin'."

"Never bin in my 'ouse before."

"Then come along," and Philip was tugged onward, but not before he found courage to say:

"Thank you once more, Mr. Judd. I will keep my word, never fear."

"What are you thanking him for?" said the constable.

"For believing in me," was the curt answer.

The policeman tried to extract some meaning from the words, but failed. He privately admitted that it was an extraordinary affair. How came a boy who spoke like a gentleman and was dressed like a street Arab to be wandering about London with a pocketful of diamonds and admitted to the private office of the chief diamond merchant in Hatton Garden? He gave it up, but silently thanked the stars which connected him with an important case.

At last Philip's Via Dolorosa ended in the Bridewell police station. He was paraded before the inspector in charge, a functionary who would not have exhibited any surprise had the German Emperor been brought before him charged with shoplifting.

He opened a huge ledger, tried if his pen would make a hair stroke on a piece of paper, and said, laconically:

"Name?"

No answer from the prisoner, followed by emphatic demands from inspector and constable, the former volunteering the information that to refuse your name and address was in itself an offense against the law.

Philip's *sang-froid* was coming to his aid. The horror of his passage through the gaping mob had cauterized all other sentiments, and he now saw that if he would preserve his incognito he must adopt a ruse.

"Philip Morland," he said, doggedly, when the inspector asked him his name for the last time before recording a definite refusal.

"Philip Morland!" It sounded curiously familiar in his ears. His mother was a Miss Morland prior to her marriage, but he had not noticed the odd coincidence that he should have been christened after the "Sir Philip" of the packet of letters so fortunately left behind that morning.

"Address?"

"Park Lane."

The inspector began to write before the absurdity of the reply dawned on him. He stopped.

"Is your mother a caretaker there, or your father employed in a mews?"

"My father and mother are dead."

"Then will you kindly inform us what number in Park Lane you live at?"

"I have not determined that as yet. I intend to buy a house there."

Some constables lounging about the office laughed, and the inspector, incensed out of his routine habits, shouted, angrily:

"This is no place for joking, boy. Answer me properly, or it will be worse for you."

"I have answered you quite properly. The constable who brought me here has in his possession diamonds worth many thousands of pounds belonging to me. I own a hundred times as many. Surely I can buy a house in Park Lane if I like."

The inspector was staggered by this well-bred insolence. He was searching for some crushing legal threat that would frighten the boy into a state of due humility when Mr. Isaacstein entered.

The Hatton Garden magnate again related the circumstances attending Philip's arrest, and the inspector promptly asked:

"What charge shall I enter? You gave him into custody. Do you think he has stolen the diamonds?"

Isaacstein had been thinking hard during a short cab drive. His reply was unexpectedly frank.

"He could not have stolen what never existed. There is no such known collection of meteoric diamonds in the world."

"But there must be, because they are here."

By this time the parcel of dirty-white stones was lying open on the counter, and both Jew and policeman were gazing at them intently. There was a nettling logic in the inspector's retort.

"I cannot answer riddles," said Isaacstein, shortly. "I can only state the facts. If any other man in the city of London is a higher authority on diamonds than I, go to him and ask his opinion."

"Mr. Isaacstein is right," interposed Philip. "No one else owns diamonds like mine. No one else can obtain them. I have robbed no man. Give me my diamonds and let me go."

The inspector laughed officially. He gazed intently at Philip, and then sought illumination from the Jew's perturbed countenance, but Isaacstein was moodily examining the contents of the paper and turning over both the stones and the scraps of iron with an air of profound mystification.

"I'll tell you what," said the inspector, jubilantly, after a slight pause. "We will charge him with being in unlawful possession of certain diamonds, supposed to have been stolen. He has given me a false name and a silly address. Park Lane, the young imp said he lived in."

"A man in your position ought to be more accurate," interposed Philip. "I did not say I lived in Park Lane. I told you I intended to buy a house there."

Seldom, indeed, were the minor deities of the police station bearded in this fashion, and by a callow youth. But the inspector was making the copperplate hair strokes which had gained him promotion, and his brain had gone back to its normal dullness.

"I will just see if we cannot bring him before a magistrate at once," he said, addressing Mr. Isaacstein. "Can you make it convenient to attend the court within an hour, sir? Then we will get a week's remand, and we will soon find out –"

"A week's remand!" Philip became white again, and those large eyes of his began to burn. "What have I done –"

"Silence! Search him carefully and take him to the cells."

The boy turned despairingly to the Jew.

"Mr. Isaacstein," he said, with a pitiful break in his voice, "why do you let them do this thing? You are a rich man, and well known. Tell them they are wrong."

But Isaacstein was wobbling now in a renewed state of excitement.

"What can I do, boy!" he vociferated, almost hysterically. "You must say where you got these stones, and then, perhaps, you can clear up everything."

Philip's lips met in a thin seam.

"I will never tell you," he answered, and not another word would he utter.

They searched him and found nothing in his pockets save a key, a broken knife, some bits of string neatly coiled, and a couple of buttons. He spent the next hour miserably in a whitewashed cell. He refused some coffee and bread brought to him at twelve o'clock, and this was the only sentient break in a wild jumble of conflicting thoughts. The idea came to him that he must be dreaming – that soon he would awaken amidst the familiar surroundings of Johnson's Mews. To convince himself that this was not so, he reviewed the history of the preceding twenty-four hours. At that time yesterday he was going to Fleet Street with a capital of ninepence to buy a quire of newspapers. He remembered where he had sold each of the five copies, where he bought a penny bun, and how he came to lose his stock and get cuffed into the bargain for rescuing a girl from an overturning carriage.

Then his mind reverted to his fixed resolve to hang himself, and his stolid preparations for the last act in his young life's tragedy. Was that where the dream started, or was the whole thing a definite reality, needing only a stout heart and unfaltering purpose to carry him through triumphantly? Yes. That was it. "Be strong and brave and all will be well with you." Surely his mother had looked beyond the grave when she uttered her parting words. Perhaps, if he lay down and closed his eyes, he would see her. He always hoped to see her in his dreams, but never was the vision vouchsafed to him. Poor lad, he did not understand that his sleep was the sound sleep of health and innocence, when dreams, if they come at all, are but grotesque distortions of the simple facts of everyday existence. Only once had he dimly imagined her presence, and that was at a moment which his sane mind now refused to resurrect.

Nevertheless, he was tired. Yielding to the conceit, he stretched himself on the wooden couch that ran along one side of his narrow cell.

Some one called to him, not unkindly.

"Now, youngster, jump up. The van is here."

He was led through gloomy corridors and placed in a receptacle just large enough to hold him uncomfortably in a huge, lumbering vehicle. He thought he was the only occupant, which was true enough, the prisoners' van having made a special call for his benefit.

After a rumbling journey through unseen streets, he emerged into another walled-in courtyard. He was led through more corridors, and told to "skip lively" up a winding staircase. At the top he came out into a big room, with a well-like space in front of him, filled with a huge table, around which sat several gentlemen, among them Mr. Isaacstein, while on an elevated platform beyond was

an elderly man, who wore eyeglasses and who wrote something in a book without looking up when Philip's name was called out.

A police inspector, whom Philip had not seen before, made a short statement, and was followed by the constable who effected the arrest. His story was brief and correct, and then the inspector stated that Mr. Wilson, of Grant & Sons, Ludgate Circus, would be called at the next hearing, as he – the inspector – would ask for a remand to enable inquiries to be made. Meanwhile, Mr. Isaacstein, of Hatton Garden, had made it convenient to attend that day, and would be pleased to give evidence if his worship desired to hear him.

"Certainly," said Mr. Abingdon, the magistrate. "This seems to be a somewhat peculiar case, and I will be glad if Mr. Isaacstein can throw any light upon it."

But Mr. Isaacstein could not do any such thing. He wound up a succinct account of Philip's visit and utterances by declaring that there was no collection of meteoric diamonds known to him from which such a remarkable set of stones could be stolen.

This emphatic statement impressed the magistrate.

"Let me see them," he said.

The parcel was handed up to him, and he examined its contents with obvious interest.

"Are you quite sure of their meteoric origin, Mr. Isaacstein?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Can you form any estimate of their probable value?"

"About fifty thousand pounds!"

The reply startled the magistrate, and it sent a thrill through the court.

"Really! So much!" Mr. Abingdon was almost scared.

"If, after cutting, they turn out as well as I expect, that is a moderate estimate of their worth."

"I take it, from what you say, that meteoric diamonds are rare?"

Isaacstein closed his throat with a premonitory cough and bunched up his shoulders. A slight wobble was steadied by his stumpy hands on the rail of the witness box. He was really the greatest living authority on the subject, and he knew it.

"It is a common delusion among diamond miners that diamonds fall from the skies in meteoric showers," he said. "There is some sort of foundation for this mistaken view, as the stones are found in volcanic pipes or columns of diamantiferous material, and the crude idea is that gigantic meteors fell and plowed these deep holes, distributing diamonds in all directions as they passed. But the so-called pipes are really the vents of extinct volcanoes. Ignorant people do not realize that the chemical composition of the earth does not differ greatly from that of the bodies which surround it in space, so that the same process of manufacture under high temperature and at great pressure which creates a diamond in a meteor has equal powers here. In a word, what has happened in the outer universe has also happened at Kimberley. Iron acts as the solvent during the period of creation, so to speak. Then, in the lapse of ages, it oxidizes by the action of air or water, and the diamonds remain."

The magistrate nodded.

"There are particles of a mineral that looks like iron among these stones?" he said.

The question gave Isaacstein time to draw a fresh supply of breath. Sure of his audience now, he proceeded more slowly.

"That is a certain proof of a meteoric source. A striking confirmation of the fact is supplied by a district in Arizona. Here, on a plain five miles in diameter, are scattered thousands of masses of metallic iron, varying in weight from half a ton to a fraction of one ounce. An enormous meteoric shower fell there at some period, and near the center is a crater-like hole which suggests the impact of some very large body which buried itself in the earth. All mineralogists know the place as the Canyon Diabolo, or Devil's Gulch, and specimens of its ore are in every collection. Ordinary tools were spoiled, and even emery wheels worn by some hard ingredient in the iron, and analysis has revealed the presence therein of three distinct forms of diamond – the ordinary stone, like these

now before you, both transparent and black graphite, and amorphous carbon; that is, carbon without crystallization."

"I gather that the diamantiferous material was present in the form of tiny particles and not in stones at all approaching these in size?" said Mr. Abingdon.

"Exactly. I have never either seen or heard of specimens like those. In 1886 a meteor fell in Russia, and contained one per cent. of diamond in a slightly metamorphosed state. In 1846 the Ava meteorite fell in Hungary, and it held crystalline graphite in the bright as well as the dark form. But, again, the distribution was well diffused, and of slight commercial value. Sir William Crookes, or any eminent chemist, will bear me out in the assumption that the diamonds now before your eyes are absolutely matchless by the product of any recorded meteoric source."

Isaacstein, having delivered his little lecture, looked and felt important. The magistrate bent forward with a pleasant smile.

"I am very much obliged to you for the highly interesting information you have given," he said. "One more question – the inevitable corollary of your evidence is that the boy now in the dock has either found a meteor or a meteoric deposit. Can you say if it is a matter of recent occurrence?"

"Judging by the appearance of the accompanying scraps of iron ore, I should say that they have been quite recently in a state of flux from heat. The silicates seem to be almost eliminated."

The magistrate was unquestionably puzzled. Queer incidents happen in police courts daily, and the most unexpected scientific and technical points are elucidated in the effort to secure an accurate comprehension of matters in dispute. But never, during his long tenancy of the court, had he been called on to deal with a case of this nature. He smiled in his perplexity.

"We all remember the copy-book maxim: 'Let justice be done though the heavens fall,'" he said; "but here it is clearly shown that the ideal is not easily reached."

Of course, everyone laughed, and the reporters plied pen and pencil with renewed activity. Here was a sensation with a vengeance – worth all the display it demanded in the evening papers. Headlines would whoop through a quarter of a column, and Philip's meteor again run through space.

The boy himself was apparently the most disinterested person present. While listening to Isaacstein, he again experienced the odd sensation of aloofness, of lofty domination, amidst a commonplace and insignificant environment. The Jew was clever, of course, but his cleverness was that of the text-book, a dry record of fact which needed genius to illuminate the printed page. And these lawyers, reporters, policemen, with the vacuous background of loungers, the friends and bottle holders of thieves and drunkards – the magistrate, even, remote in his dignity and sense of power – what were they to him? – of no greater import than the paving stones of the streets to the pulsating life of London as it passed.

The magistrate glanced at Isaacstein and stroked his chin. The Jew gazed intently at the packet of diamonds and rubbed his simous nose. There was a deep silence in court, broken only by the occasional shuffle of feet among the audience at the back – a shuffle which stopped instantly when the steely glance of a policeman darted in that direction.

At last the magistrate seemed to make up his mind to a definite course of action.

"There is only one person present," he said, "who can throw light on this extraordinary case, and that is the boy himself."

He looked at Philip, and all eyes quickly turned toward the thin, ragged figure standing upright against the rail that shut him off from the well of the court. The professional people present noted that the magistrate did not allude to the strange-looking youth as "the prisoner."

What was going to happen? Was this destitute urchin going to leave the court with diamonds in his pocket worth fifty thousand pounds? Oddly enough, no one paid heed to Philip's boast that he owned far more than that amount. It was not he, but his packet of diamonds, that evoked wonder. And had not Isaacstein, the great merchant and expert, appraised them openly! Was it possible that those

dirty-white pebbles could be endowed with such potentiality. Fifty thousand pounds! There were men in the room, and not confined to the unwashed, whose palates dried and tongues swelled at the notion.

CHAPTER VI

A Game of Hazard

Philip knew that a fresh ordeal was at hand. How could he preserve his secret – how hope to prevail against the majesty of British law as personified by the serene authority of the man whose penetrating glance now rested on him? His was a dour and stubborn nature, though hardly molded as yet in rigid lines. He threw back his head and tightened his lips. He would cling to his anonymity to the bitter end, no matter what the cost. But he would not lie. Never again would he condescend to adopt a subterfuge.

"Philip Morland," began the magistrate.

"My name is not Philip Morland," interrupted the boy.

"Then what is your name?"

"I will not tell you, sir. I mean no disrespect, but the fact that I am treated as a criminal merely because I wish to dispose of my property warns me of what I may expect if I state publicly who I am and where I live."

For the first time the magistrate heard the correct and well-modulated flow of Philip's speech. If anything, it made more dense the mist through which he was trying to grope his way.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean that if I state who I am, I will be robbed and swindled by all with whom I come in contact. I have starved, I have been beaten, for trying to earn a living. I was struck last night for saving a girl's life. I was arrested and dragged through the streets, handcuffed, this morning, because I went openly to a dealer to sell a portion – to sell some of my diamonds. I will take no more risks. You may imprison me, but you cannot force me to speak. If you are a fair man, you will give me back my diamonds and let me go free."

This outburst fairly electrified the court. Philip could not have adopted a more domineering tone were he the Governor of the Bank of England charged with passing a counterfeit half-crown. The magistrate was as surprised as any.

"I do not wish to argue with you," he said, quietly; "nor do I expect you to commit yourself in any way. But you must surely see that for a poverty-stricken boy to be found in possession of gems of great marketable value is a circumstance that demands inquiry, however honest and – er – well bred you may be."

"The only witness against me has said that the diamonds could not have been stolen," cried Philip, now thoroughly aroused, and ready for any war of wits.

"Quite true. The inference is that you have discovered a meteoric deposit of diamonds."

"I have. Some – not all – are before you."

A tremor shook the court. Isaacstein swallowed something, and his head sank more deeply below his shoulders.

"Then I take it that you will not inform me of the locality of this deposit?"

"Yes."

"And you think that by disclosing your name and address you will reveal that locality?"

Philip grew red.

"Is it fair," he said, with a curious iciness in his tone, "that a man of your age should use his position and knowledge to try and trip a boy who is brought before you on a false charge?"

It was the magistrate's turn to look slightly confused. There was some asperity in his reply.

"I am not endeavoring to trip you, but rather to help you to free yourself from a difficult position. However, do I understand that you refuse to answer any questions?"

"I do." The young voice rang through the building with an amazing fierceness.

Mr. Abingdon bent over the big book in front of him and scribbled something.

"Remanded for a week," he muttered.

"Downstairs," growled the court jailer, and Philip disappeared from sight. The magistrate was left gazing at the packet of diamonds, and he called Isaacstein, the clerk of the court, and two police inspectors into his private office for a consultation.

Meanwhile London was placarded with Philip's adventures that Saturday evening. Contents bills howled in their blackest and biggest type, newsvenders bawled themselves hoarse over this latest sensation, journalistic ferrets combined theory and imagination in the effort to spin out more "copy," Scotland Yard set its keenest detectives at work to reveal the secret of Philip's identity, while Isaacstein, acting on the magistrate's instructions, wrote to every possible source of information in the effort to obtain some clew as to recent meteoric showers.

No one thought of connecting the great storm with the "Diamond Mystery." Meteors usually fall from a clear sky, and are in no way affected by atmospheric disturbances, their normal habitat being far beyond the influence of the earth's envelope of air.

And so the "hunt for the meteor" commenced, and was kept up with zest for many days. "Have you found it?" became the stock question of the humorist, and might be addressed with impunity to any stranger, particularly if the stranger were a nice-looking girl. No one answered "What?" because of the weird replies that were forthcoming.

The police failed utterly in their efforts to discover Philip's identity or residence. Johnson's Mews, Mile End Road, might as well be in Timbuctoo for all the relation it bore to Ludgate Hill or Hatton Garden. An East End policeman might have recognized Philip had he seen him, but the official description of his clothing and personal appearance applied to thousands of hobbledehoys in every district of London.

Two persons among the six millions of the metropolis alone possessed the knowledge that would have led the inquirers along the right track. The doctor who attended Mrs. Anson in her last illness, had he read the newspaper comments on the boy's speech and mannerisms, might have seen the coincidence supplied by the Christian name, and thus been led to make some further investigation. But his hands were full of trouble on his own account. A dispenser mixed a prescription wrongly, and dosed a patient with half an ounce of arsenic instead of half an ounce of cream of tartar. The subsequent inquest gave the doctor enough to do, and the first paper he had leisure to peruse contained a bare reference to the "Diamond Mystery" as revealing no further developments. He passed the paragraph unread.

The remaining uncertain element centered in old O'Brien, the pensioner. Now it chanced that the treasury had discovered that by a clerical mistake in a warrant, the old man had been drawing twopence a day in excess of his rightful pension for thirty-three years. Some humorist in Whitehall thereupon sent him a demand for one hundred and three pounds and fifteen shillings, and the member of the Whitechapel Division was compelled to adopt stern tactics in the House before the matter was adjusted, and O'Brien was allowed to receive the reduced quarterly stipend then due. During that awful crisis the poor, old fellow hardly ate or slept. Even when it had ended, the notion remained firmly fixed in his mind that the "murdherin' government had robbed him of a hundred gowlden sovereigns, an' more."

As for newspapers, the only item he read during many days was the question addressed by his "mimber" to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the brief reply thereto, both of which were fixed beforehand by mutual arrangement.

In one instance the name given and afterward repudiated by the boy did attract some attention. On the Monday following the remand, a lady sat at breakfast in a select West End Hotel, and languidly perused the record of the case until her eye caught the words "Philip Morland." Then her air of delicate hauteur vanished, and she left her breakfast untouched until, with hawklike curving of neck and nervous clutching of hands, she had read every line of the police court romance. She was a tall,

thin, aristocratic-looking woman, with eyes set too closely together, a curved nose, like the beak of a bird of prey, and hands covered with a leathery skin suggesting talons. Her attire and pose were elegant, but she did not seem to be a pleasant sort of person. Her lips parted in a vinegary smile as she read. She evidently did not believe one word of the newspaper report in so far as the diamonds were concerned.

"A vulgar swindle!" she murmured to herself. "How is it possible for a police magistrate to be taken in in such manner! I suppose the Jew person knows more about it than appears on the surface. But how came the boy to give that name? It is sufficiently uncommon to be remarkable. How stupid it was of Julie to mislay my dressing case. It would be really interesting to know what has become of those people, and now I may have to leave town before I can find out."

How much further her disjointed comments might have gone it is impossible to say, but at that moment a French maid entered the room and gazed inquiringly around the various small tables with which it was filled. At last she found the lady, who was breakfasting alone, and sped swiftly toward her.

"I am so glad, milady," she said, speaking in French. "The bag has found itself at the police station. The cabman brought it there, and, if you please, milady, as the value was given as eight pounds, he claimed a reward of one pound."

"Which you will pay yourself. You lost the bag," was the curt reply. "Where is it?"

The maid's voice was somewhat tearful as she answered:

"In milady's room. I paid the sovereign."

Her ladyship rose and glided gracefully toward the door, followed by the maid, who whispered to a French waiter – bowing most deferentially to the guest as he held the door open – that her mistress was a cat. He confided his own opinion that her ladyship was a holy pig, and the two passed along a corridor.

Lady Morland hastily tore open the recovered dressing case, and consulted an address book.

"Oh! here it is," she cried, triumphantly. "Number three, Johnson's Mews, Mile End Road, E. What a horrid-smelling place. However, Messrs. Sharpe & Smith will now be able to obtain some definite intelligence for me. Julie! My carriage in ten minutes."

Thus it happened that during the afternoon, a dapper little clerk descended from an omnibus in the neighborhood of Johnson's Mews, and began his inquiries, as all Londoners do, by consulting a policeman. Certain facts were forthcoming.

"A Mrs. Anson, a widow, who lived in Johnson's Mews? Yes, I think a woman of that name died a few weeks ago. I remember seeing a funeral leave the mews. I don't know anything about the boy. Sometimes, when I pass through there at night, I have seen a light in the house. However, here it is. Let's have a look at it."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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