

The KING of DIAMONDS.

By Louis Tracy,
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Chapter IV. (Continued.)

"Talks like a little gentleman," he does. If my little Jimmie had 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' nippence, 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 programme 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 could 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 man had not caught its drift yet. The gaunt and unkempt visitor was evidently burlesquing the accent of such genteel 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 v'll 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 plazy."

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. Philip 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 see 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 on to the urchin with the refined utter-

ance who had dared 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 £250 which he would sell to Lady Somebody for £800 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 man 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 £600 or £700," 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?" he asked.

"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.

Now 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 this man 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 jour-

ney, 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 today, 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 merchant, 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, £10, a twenty-carat gem of the same purity is worth any sum beyond £2,000, 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 man'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 man, 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.

"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 any one 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 man 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 read 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 at either Ludgate Hill or Hatton Garden. How long could they keep him a prisoner? Would others and 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 a spair 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 dictation. 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 Isaacstein'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.

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CHAPTER V.

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.

"Wat's 'e tin a-doin' off?"

"Nicked a lady's purse, eh?"

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

"Bill-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 midday customers, and the baldheaded 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 denouement 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 thiefin' 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 of false pretences, 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. Wat'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 or constable, the former volunteering the information that to refuse your name and address was in itself an offense against the law.

Philip's sangfroid 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 merchant and policeman were gazing at them intently. There was a netting 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 Isaacstein'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 duties 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 Isaacstein.

"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 wabbling 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 went the next hour miserably in a white-washed cell. He refused some coffee and bread brought to him at 12 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 amid 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 nippence 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

estimate of their worth.

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

Isaacstein closed his throat with a promontory cough and lunched up his shoulders. A slight wobble was steadied. 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."