THE KING DIAMOND.

What the Purser Knew of It and How He Suddenly Saw New Light.

By SUTCLIFFE HINE.

"Speaking of pluck," said the purser of the Laconic, "the bravest man, the very bravest I ever knew, was a thief."

Mr. Horrocks delivered himself of this statement during a momentary hush in the after-dinner chat of the smoke room, and withdrew his eyes from the little neat man who had just come in. He examined with interest the butt of his cigar, and carefully licked an angle of leaf which threatened to come loose.

Sir Randal Vereker, the hydraulic specialist, who had won the auction pool on the run that day, was standing coffee and liqueurs round, and the purser, after telling the attendant steward that his was a kümmel and cognac, stuck the cigar into the corner of his mouth and jingled the keys in his trousers pocket. Then he thrust his heels out straight before him, and blew truncated cones of tobacco smoke at an incandescent lamp in the deck above.

The general talk in the smoke room did not go on Mr. Horrocks, as became his office, was a noted reconteur, and only Pitcairn continued his remarks on the silver question as affecting the export trade in Bradford manufactured goods. Pitcairn had crossed to New York nine times in the Laconic already, and had a notion that he knew by heart all the purser's tales. Moreover, being, in his capacity as drummer, a most widely travelled man himself, he quite believed that his own remarks were thoroughly well worth listening to.

"He stole the biggest diamond I ever saw," the purser remarked meditatively, during one of Pitcairn's pauses for breath. "It was a stone that should have gone down into history on the rim of some Emperor's crown. But, so far as I know, it never came up to the surface again after that fellow stole it."

"Probably broken up," suggested Vereker, "and sold in pieces."

The purser looked down sharply. "How did you hear about it, Sir Randal?" he asked.

Vereker laughed. "I was only generalizing," he said. "I haven't a notion of what you're talking about."

"They christened it the 'King Diamond' out at Kimberley."

"Never heard of it," said Sir Randal. "I leave Lady Vereker to specialize in diamonds for the pair of us."

"Now there you are again," said Pitcairn. "Diamonds are just like silver. The price varies according to the quantity put on the market, and as things are situated at present, the nations are at the mercy of traders who've got capital and brains enough to make corners. Now, if I had the managing of it—"

"You haven't," the purser cut in acidly, "and you are never likely to have. You can handle diamonds in a tie pin, but in bulk they'd just flummox you."

"Oh, trot out your chestnut, old man," said Pitcairn. "Some one wake me if I snore."

The smoke room rustled itself into easy positions for listening, and the purser, after pretending for a minute or so to ignore the silence suddenly looked down and said:

"Oh, you want the table, do you?"

"For heaven's sake, go on, man, and get it over," said Pitcairn.

"Well," said the purser, "there's only one fellow in this smoke room this yarn'll be a chestnut to, and he's new to the Laconic. It isn't a yarn I usually trot out for the benefit of passengers. It shows up one man as a specially fine sample of fool, and he's a man I've a particular liking for, and he's sitting in my breeches this minute. I didn't always use to be in this western ocean trade. I started life at sea on the Cape run, and I'd worked up from the very bottom to being purser on the finest ship that went down there. It was a jolly snug berth, I can tell you, with lots of pickings, and as this business with the King Diamond bundled me out of it and left me to cool my heels about the streets for a matter of twenty very lean months, it isn't a thing I chatter about through sheer pride at being sacked."

"Which line was that on?" asked Pitcairn.

"Never you mind," said the purser. "It was one of the two big ones, and you can toss up between them. But it was the popular line just then, because the other had had some accidents, and we were the popular ship. We were ram jam full, and the skipper had let his room to a Hatton Garden Jew for a hundred guineas for the run home, and was bunking in the chart house. He'd a record passenger list, and they were all very flush. Nothing was too expensive; they always betted in cases of champagne, and I guess the liquor profits alone on that run footed up to more than a thousand pounds. I tell you I felt very cock-a-whoop over it. I didn't see how the firm could avoid giving me a rise."

Pitcairn began to hum "For he's a jolly good purser," but the smoke room scowled him to silence.

"Among other things we'd about a gallon and a half of diamonds on board, and that's a kind of freight which pays in a way which would surprise idiots who only know about the cost of sending shoddy across the western ocean."

"Shoddy doesn't come from Bradford," said Pitcairn. "Shoddy is made——"

"Oh, kill that man, somebody," the smoke room shouted, and the purser proceeded.

"The diamonds were done up in little canvas bags (barring the big stone, which had a special sealed case to itself,) and as of course they weren't polished they looked like so many rusty pebbles. The bags were put in a safe, and the safe was under my bed place. There was only one key to the safe, and that lived at the end of my watch chain. It was anxious work being responsible for those gems, I can tell you, so long as we'd any land connection with South Africa, but once we were clear I felt pretty easy. There was an electric bell fitted to the door of the safe, and if anybody meddled who didn't know how to unswitch it there'd have been noise enough spread about to wake the ship. And, besides, if anybody did loot the diamonds, what were they to do with them? Madeira and Southampton were the only places we touched, and if there was anything gone you can bet your life no one would have been allowed to quit the ship till we knew where it was.

"Now, diamonds are all very well in their place, but too much diamonds in the conversation—especially when none of them happens to be yours—rather sour on one. And I can tell you the popular ship fairly made me ill at times. There were only two topics for general conversation, and those were diamonds and their prices, and when any one wanted to be brilliantly original, he talked about the King Diamond, and drew pictures of it in lead pencil on the back of our wine lists. I should think I must have heard the history of that infernal stone at least eighteen thousand times, counting all the variations. How a Kaffir found it in the blue clay, how he swallowed it, how they gave him medicine, how three I. D. B. Kopje-wallopers from Petticoat lane were after it, how the proper owners safeguarded it with guns and a six-ton burglar-proof box, how half the white men in the Cape did obeisance to it through iron bars at half a guinea a head, how syndicates were formed to buy up tenth shares in the gem, and all the rest of the degrading money-grabbing rubbish. I might have admired that stone myself if I'd had a fair chance, and even have worshipped it as a mild sort of god, but the talk about it killed all my interest, and if it hadn't been for the profit it would bring the steamer as carrier, I should have gone very near hating it. And so, as things were, I was just driven into chumming with a man called Farren out of disgust for every one else on the passenger list.

"I tell you straight that on any other trip this Farren was not a man I should have had anything more than a nod for. He was a little slip of a fellow with hookbottle shoulders and wandering eyes, and he'd a sort of missionary notions that I'd no use for whatever. But he didn't talk diamonds; thought they were sinful, or something, and I tell you, after a spell with the others, that man's society used to come to me like a visit to the country. I'd tip him the wink, and he and I'd slip away from the rest, and go down to my room, and put up our heels and rest. He'd stretch himself out on the sofa, and I'd slip my shoes and lie on the bed and just listen while he talked. At times, I'd feel that grateful to him I almost wished he'd hand around the hat for a collection after he'd finished.

"Well, gentlemen, things went on in this way—diamonds, diamonds, diamonds, with short refreshing spells of Farren, till after we'd left Madeira, and had made half a day's steam toward home, and then a queerish thing happened. We came across a steamer lying to right in our track.

"There's nothing in that, you'll say. Well, perhaps not, but wait a bit. This steamer, as soon as we drew abeam of her, made steam and bore away on our course, keeping parallel to us, about a quarter of a mile off to port. It doesn't take much to interest people on a long voyage liner, and you can guess it wasn't long before most pairs of eyes aboard were turned onto the other steamer—especially as she happened to be a yacht. Who was she? plenty of people were asking, and the answer to that was simple. She was Lord Raybury's yacht, a bran new sixteen-knotter. Her picture had been in all the illustrated papers, and two of our officers had seen her before she left the yard, so there was no mistake about that matter. But what she was up to no one could say, and our passengers made a regular industry out of betting over it.

"We officers of the ship didn't worry our heads much about the matter. If you were to try and find out the why and wherefore of all the queer things you see in the two Atlantics, I guess you'd go first gray and then bald, and then in a lunatic asylum within three years' time. And so we looked at the yacht, hanging always in the same place on our port beam, without worrying our heads particularly as to what her little game might be. But, as I say, the passengers were different. It was a bran-new interest to the lot of them. It was an A1 topic to gamble on, and I tell you the talk in that smoke room began to get interesting. We'd got some really imaginative and accomplished liars on our passenger list that trip, and they were always ready to back up their talk with good solid bets.

"They became regularly amusing to listen to. Diamonds were not spoken of once after Lord Raybury's yacht joined us, and I began to think that our passengers could make themselves a nice afternoon's a lot as any man might want to meet. I just let Farren slide. I'd got no use for any more of his sermon-and-water talk, and the day after the yacht turned up, when he asked himself down to my room while I was making up some accounts after lunch, I let him know sharply enough that people who came in there had to wait for an invitation. A purser like me doesn't chum with cheap teetotallers of the Mr. Farren type unless he's pretty hard up for a mate. But, mark you, that man was no fool, and he got around me two days later in a way I don't think anybody could conveniently have guessed at.

"From what turned out afterward I suppose he intended to play his little game directly after the yacht joined us, but the weather was a bit dirty then, and it freshened up to a snorting breeze directly afterward, which we carried with us all the road through the bay. There was a big ugly head sea running, which knocked a couple of knots off our pace, and the yacht was making very wet weather of it indeed. A careful skipper would have slowed her down, but he's didn't. He rammed her at it, and risked carrying everything away. He hung on exactly in his place, and after passenger's talk about Lord Raybury was on board forcing the old man to drive her.

"But when we rounded Ushant and opened out the channel, the breeze left us and the sea went down a bit, although it was still ugly enough. And that was the time Farren came on the carpet again, as I guess I've said, and he did got me the sack from the company, I'll own that no man could have shown more real dare-devil armor-plated pluck.

"He came up to me in the port alley way that day just after lunch, wabbling about on his legs, like he always did when we were in a sea-way.

"'Mr. Horrocks,' he says, which his cheap, sickly grin, 'it's a long time since we've had one of our chats together.'

"'Yes,' said I. 'I've been busy. I'm busy now. I'm very behind hand with making up the ship's papers.'

"'Ah,' says he, 'you've been so taken up with this yacht business that it's dragged you away from your work. It seems to have made a large amount of interest in the ship.'

"'Oh,' said I, 'they will bet on anything.'

"He laughed in a weak sort of way. 'Well, purser,' says he. 'I hope you've feathered your nest over the affair.'

"'I can't say I have,' said I, and began to move a little toward my room.

"'Pity that,' says he, 'when it's so easy.'

"I turned round. 'How do you mean? Could you make money out of it?'

"'Certainly I could, if I wished to; only, as you know, I consider it wrong to bet.'

"'Then,' said I, a bit sarcastically, 'you must have information which nobody else on this ship has got.'

"His eyes wandered over me with a look of surprise, and a lurch sent him against a cabin door. He was a man who never found his sea legs. 'And why shouldn't I have?' he says.

"'Well, if it comes to that, how can you of all people know what the yacht is doing here?'

"'Never mind, Mr. Horrocks, how I picked up the knowledge, but you can take it from me that I not only know who's aboard, but I also know the exact business she's on.'

"'That's an asset of value,' I said, and then stopped and considered a minute. 'Is there any consideration I could offer which would induce you to part with the knowledge?'

"'My dear Horrocks,' he said, 'if you want to know, of course I'll tell you freely enough. I'd have told you any time if you'd asked me. Only I don't think we've seen much of one another since the yacht's been in sight.'

"He had me there.

"'It's a long story,' he went on, 'but if you can wait a minute or so I'll tell it you now—if you think no one is likely to overhear us, standing where we are.'

"'Certainly not, Mr. Farren,' said I. 'You come right along to my room and have a cigar. You drink whisky-and-water, I know, but you shall have iced lemonade in two shakes if you care for that.'

The purser of the Laconic ceased speaking, and scraped a match. When it was well alight he held the charred end of his cigar in the flame, and we looked at him with interest. "I am afraid," he said, "that I am boring you gentlemen with all these preliminaries. I never could tell a tale well. Besides, there's one man in this smoke room who could finish this yarn much better than I can. He knows a lot of facts about it that I have not even guessed at up to now."

The eyes of the smoke room swung round till they settled on Pitcairn, but that excellent person for once in his life looked slightly nonplussed. The purser came to his rescue. He intimated that Pitcairn's brain was quite unequal to guessing the sequel of the yarn, and again invited the only man who could finish it to do so in detail. We began to look at one another with interest. It was occurring to each of us that we must have struck up a shipboard acquaintance with some man who only a few years previously had been concerned in a very remarkable robbery. But after a cursory survey that notion shown any one to appear obtrusively guilty (although for some reason we few of us seemed to be looking exactly at our best just then) a quaint feeling of restraint got hold of us. Each man seemed to feel that it was vaguely insulting to look at his neighbor, and eyes glanced up toward the deck above, and the smoke mist thickened. But, by degrees glances were lowered, and found a safe resting place on the person of Mr. Horrocks.

It was Vereker who voiced the general wish. "I think, purser," he said, "we shall have to bother you to go on. You have shown such power as a reconteur that the other man, whoever he may be, is evidently nervous of entering into competition."

The purser grinned, and bit the end from a fresh cigar. "Funny thing, Sir Randal," said he. "But Farren was nervous, too. When Farren came into my room that day I thought he would have fainted, and for good ten minutes he sat there on my sofa with the colors going and coming from his face like the limelight in a theatre. But I didn't hurry him or anything of that kind. I let him take his time, and sat on the bed and watched the yacht through my porthole. She was there in her usual place just abeam, with about a quarter of a mile of ugly looking water between her and us, and I was running over in my mind how I was going to make dividends out of her.

"Farren roused me up by calling my name, and I tell you what I saw when I turned round fairly made me sweat. He was standing there with his back against the door and one hand turning the key behind him as I looked. He'd a revolver in his other fist, with the second finger on the trigger, and it didn't require much brains to see that whatever else he might be he was no blooming amateur with a gun. He was looking yslek enough still, but I give him credit, he came to the point like a man.

"'Now I'll tell you, Mr. Horrocks, what that yacht's there for,' he says, 'she's come to take away the King Diamond, and I'm here to carry it across to her. I'll trouble you for that safe key which hangs at the end of your watch chain.'

"Well, I'll own freely I was took all of a heap. 'By heavens, Mr. Farren,' I began to stammer, 'this is piracy—but he cut me short.

"'I quite agree with you,' he answered, 'but we'll take all that for said. I've got no time to talk—and—it would annoy me very much to shoot you. I don't like you for yourself, Horrocks, but you mentioned you have a wife and family in London, and I've a respect for them. Turn round, please. Thanks. Now, you'll quite understand that my pistol is within a foot of your backbone, and if you force me to shoot you, I shall just take the key and help myself. So I want you to clearly understand that you'll only lose your life if you are obstinate through any foolish notions of being faithful to your trust, and lose it quite uselessly. Kindly shift your bedclothes on to the floor.'

"I did it.

"'Now switch off that infernal alarm bell which you bragged about and open the safe.'

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"'The King Diamond, please.'

"I handed him the morocco case. I heard the two clicks as he opened and shut it to make sure the gem was all right, and then he ordered me to clasp my hands behind my neck and go out of the cabin. 'I'll leave you your gallon and a half of other gems,' said he, 'and you can swear that you defended them if you think that will save your credit. Anyway, say what you choose. I will never contradict you. Now, outside, please, quickly.'

"I stepped into the alley way and the door slammed on my heels. I heard the bolt shoot in the lock, and I fancy it's to my credit that I didn't stay there gaping to think. I raced for the chart house at top speed. The old man wasn't there. He'd gone on to the upper bridge. And away I went after him.

"I gave him my tale in twenty words, and instinctively we both looked toward the yacht. She had slowed down and was edging in toward our track. Beyond a doubt Farren had spoken the truth. She was there after the King Diamond, and he had signalled her out of my cabin port.

"But what was to be the next move we couldn't not guess. The skipper rang 'stand by' on the engine room, and waited developments with his hand on the telegraph. 'My great Scott!' I heard him mutter, 'they're never going to have the cheek to board us. They'll stove in half our plates if they try it on with this sea running.'

"I twiddled him that the yacht had two knots more speed than we had.

"'I know that,' says the old man. 'By gum, this is a regular Robinson Crusoe piracy business. And the worst of it is, if they come on board here with a dozen rifles we's not hinder that can stop them from just helping themselves to what they fancy——' He ran his eye round the horizon. There was a Hamburg-American boat away astern of us, and a couple of steam colliers and half a dozen sailing vessels jammed on one side or the other, and not such a thing as a cruiser in sight, of course, just because we wanted one. 'That yacht's been run away with, that's what's the matter with her. This isn't a sort of game a man like Lord Raybury would play.'

"'She's slowing down, sir,' said I. 'She's dropping astern of us,' and I was going to say something else when a regular stream of yells broke out from our passengers, who were all leaning over the port rail to see what this yacht they had been betting about so industriously was up to.

"'Man overboard! There he is! By Jove, he's sunk. No, there he is again! Throw a life buoy, some one! It's Farren, that little missionary man, Farren! He jumped out through a port that nobody noticed out fine! He was sucked down under the propeller! He's got an arm cut off! He hasn't, he's holding on to a cork belt with that arm he isn't swimming with! He isn't swimming, he can't swim; look at the way he's clawing about!'

"Well, I got a life buoy, with a little between his teeth before you could say 'knife,' 'Port lifeboat,' he shouted. 'Tumble aft the crew'—and then led the way himself, and went for the awning lashings with his knife. He left the bridge to the old man, and the old man range off the engines. But a big steamer like ours carries way, and we weren't prepared, and the yacht was. They slowed down close by Farren, and their boat was in the water before ours had left the davits, and I guess they had picked him up and got him on board and their boat run up again before ours was half way to where the life buoys floated.

"There was nothing for it; we were just helpless, and we had to see that yacht starboard her helm and steam away for the open sea, with Farren, and the King Diamond and my character, and all our poor old steamboat's blooming credit stowed away under her hatches. The only thing we could do was to go on to Southampton and report. But we didn't much expect to recover the King Diamond again. Man alive, he couldn't swim and who had pluck to drop headfirst out of a port into a heavy sea, and risk being chawed up by the propeller, wasn't the sort to give up a plum once he'd got his fingers over it. And that is about what happened.

"The yacht had been run away with. She was all ready for sea, and victualled for a long cruise, when up comes a chap with a letter, forged, of course, signed 'Raybury,' to the skipper, telling him to accept bearer's orders in every particular. The chap, who was Farren's partner, came out on our steamer with him on board by arrangement at sea, and stood by and waited for a signal. He picked Farren up precious near drowned, with the morocco case all right in his pocket, and then they shoved across for the Mexican Gulf. When the yacht's skipper tumbled, Lord Raybury's letter was shown, and finally, when coal ran out and they found themselves in the Florida channel, Farren and his friend rowed off in a boat, saying they would arrange about rebunkering, and naturally enough didn't turn up again, and the yacht, after drifting three days aimlessly under canvas in the Gulf Stream, was picked up by a tramp and towed into Norfolk, Va.

"The whole thing was about as disgustingly simple as a man could want when you knew how it had been done, and the man, who hadn't a penny piece of his own to bless himself with, was the man who had the brains to see that whatever else he might be he was no blooming amateur with a gun. He was looking yslek enough still, but I give him credit, he came to the point like a man.

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"Well, I got a life buoy, with a little between his teeth before you could say 'knife,' 'Port lifeboat,' he shouted. 'Tumble aft the crew'—and then led the way himself, and went for the awning lashings with his knife. He left the bridge to the old man, and the old man range off the engines. But a big steamer like ours carries way, and we weren't prepared, and the yacht was. They slowed down close by Farren, and their boat was in the water before ours had left the davits, and I guess they had picked him up and got him on board and their boat run up again before ours was half way to where the life buoys floated.

"There was nothing for it; we were just helpless, and we had to see that yacht starboard her helm and steam away for the open sea, with Farren, and the King Diamond and my character, and all our poor old steamboat's blooming credit stowed away under her hatches. The only thing we could do was to go on to Southampton and report. But we didn't much expect to recover the King Diamond again. Man alive, he couldn't swim and who had pluck to drop headfirst out of a port into a heavy sea, and risk being chawed up by the propeller, wasn't the sort to give up a plum once he'd got his fingers over it. And that is about what happened.

"The yacht had been run away with. She was all ready for sea, and victualled for a long cruise, when up comes a chap with a letter, forged, of course, signed 'Raybury,' to the skipper, telling him to accept bearer's orders in every particular. The chap, who was Farren's partner, came out on our steamer with him on board by arrangement at sea, and stood by and waited for a signal. He picked Farren up precious near drowned, with the morocco case all right in his pocket, and then they shoved across for the Mexican Gulf. When the yacht's skipper tumbled, Lord Raybury's letter was shown, and finally, when coal ran out and they found themselves in the Florida channel, Farren and his friend rowed off in a boat, saying they would arrange about rebunkering, and naturally enough didn't turn up again, and the yacht, after drifting three days aimlessly under canvas in the Gulf Stream, was picked up by a tramp and towed into Norfolk, Va.

"The whole thing was about as disgustingly simple as a man could want when you knew how it had been done, and the man, who hadn't a penny piece of his own to bless himself with, was the man who had the brains to see that whatever else he might be, he was no blooming amateur with a gun. He was looking yslek enough still, but I give him credit, he came to the point like a man.

"'Now I'll tell you, Mr. Horrocks, what that yacht's there for,' he says, 'she's come to take away the King Diamond, and I'm here to carry it across to her. I'll trouble you for that safe key which hangs at the end of your watch chain.'

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"'I quite agree with you,' he answered, 'but we'll take all that for said. I've got no time to talk—and—it would annoy me very much to shoot you. I don't like you for yourself, Horrocks, but you mentioned you have a wife and family in London, and I've a respect for them. Turn round, please. Thanks. Now, you'll quite understand that my pistol is within a foot of your backbone, and if you force me to shoot you, I shall just take the key and help myself. So I want you to clearly understand that you'll only lose your life if you are obstinate through any foolish notions of being faithful to your trust, and lose it quite uselessly. Kindly shift your bedclothes on to the floor.'

"I did it.

"'Now switch off that infernal alarm bell which you bragged about and open the safe.'

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"I handed him the morocco case. I heard the two clicks as he opened and shut it to make sure the gem was all right, and then he ordered me to clasp my hands behind my neck and go out of the cabin. 'I'll leave you your gallon and a half of other gems,' said he, 'and you can swear that you defended them if you think that will save your credit. Anyway, say what you choose. I will never contradict you. Now, outside, please, quickly.'

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