Cape Diamonds

A Detective Story

With four other masculine fellow-sufferers—one of whom was a small, spectacled, inoffensive-looking man—Ned Girard and myself were the suffering inmates of a nondescript vehicle of the stage wagon pattern, drawn by six small cape horses, en route from the Bloemfontein diamond fields of South Africa for Wellington, thence by rail to Cape Town.

Two-thirds of the truly terrible journey had been already accomplished, yet there were still two hundred and fifty miles of travel over sun-beat plain and arid desert before us, with the mercury at 102 degrees, in such shade as our tired conveyance afforded—for, in truth, there was no other.

Our eyes were blurred and blinded by the ceaseless glare of the sun, whose rays beat down on the sandy desert from an unclouded sky, which was as brass above us. Our bodies were sore and bruised by the unceasing jar and jolt of our rudely hung vehicle. We were parched with thirst, which the lukewarm water along the route utterly failed to slake, and, though continually drowsy, could neither sleep by day nor by night, because of the intense heat, the sand-flies, swelled and burning feet, and intense nervousness engendered by the forgoing, with the other discomforts and sufferings incidental to a stage journey of some hundreds of miles through South Africa.

The most of us knew each other by sight, through having met from day to day, for some months, in and about the mining field which we had just left. But I will venture to state that six more surly, unsocial fellow-passengers than our dusty, unshorn selves were perhaps never—literally—thrown together.

If Ned and myself were perhaps a little more pronounced in general disagreeableness than the others, we considered, indeed, that we had ample provocation therefor. For thirteen months we had been toiling and perspiring, taking our several turns in the "dump" or in our twenty-four foot mining claim, as the case might be. In nearly, if not quite, a year of unremitting toil, we had barely succeeded in washing out enough small "stones" (the invariable term for diamonds in South Africa) with which to pay our running expenses; and then one stroke of the pick had unearthed a rose-diamond of such size and purity that for full sixty minutes our good fortune was the talk of Bloemfotein.

Well, that night, after our frugal supper, Ned, without speaking, extended the precious gem toward me in his open palm, as we sat at our rude table in our canvas-covered cabin. I do not answer for the scope of my partner's vision, of course. But in the uncut brilliant, as in the magician's stones, I myself saw but one object—a sweet, wistful face, framed with a wreath of dark hair, within the depths of whose soft eyes was a look as of patient waiting for the return of him who had gone to seek his fortune in the far-away diamond fields.

"Home?" was Ned's interrogative query, raising his own eyes, which had bent upon the gem, with a sort of far away look, to meet my own suddenly upturned gaze.

“Home!” I echoed with joyous emphasis.

But hardly had the word escaped my lips when a tall form dashed through the door, and upsetting the candle by a sudden blow, seized the diamond from Ned’s still outstretched hand, and was off in the darkness—the whole event having taken place in far less time than I have occupied in telling it.

Of course we gave the alarm as quickly as we could regain our scattered ideas; but though half the male population of Bloemfontein turned out, it was to no purpose.

The robber and his booty had disappeared without the slightest clew.

So it was that being in local parlance “down on our luck,” Ned and myself, disgusted and discouraged, had sold our claim to a couple of newcomers for about £300, and with those composing our present stagecoach party, had taken passage, as I have said, for Wellington, intending to return home, even though with heavy hearts and light pockets.

Besides the small spectacled man, who had represented himself as a sort of colporteur for a religious society at Cape Town, our fellow-passengers composed two diamond brokers, together with a young and very boastful fellow, who called himself McArthur. The latter had been very successful, and it was with feelings of envy we heard him relate the result of two weeks’ work in a deserted claim, where, as he informed us with many profane assertions, he had struck a “pocket,” from which he had taken stones whose value he declared was £4,000.

These he carried in a belt about his waist, together with a considerable sum of money from the sale of the claim, as he said, while girded to either hip was a heavy revolver, as a safe-guard against possible attack from road agents.

After a wretched supper at a small, barren-looking station in the Hoogboom Bottom, the journey was resumed with a fresh relay of horses and a slight diminution of our ill-temper, the heat being a degree or two less intense, by reason of the declining sun.

The conversation naturally turned upon the subject of road agents, some recent depredations of these gentry having been graphically narrated by the proprietor of the station we had just left.

“They wouldn’t play any of their games on me,” replied McArthur, touching the butts of his revolvers in a significant manner as he spoke.

The pale blue eyes of the little man who bore the not uncommon name of Smith, twinkled ever so slightly behind his spectacles at the remark, but he groaned dismally and shook his head.

“My dear sir,” he exclaimed in deprecating tones, “you surely would not commit the awful crime of murder, even to prevent the loss of the filthy lucre here which you—hem!—claim to have acquired through your own honest efforts.”

“Claim to have acquired? What the deuce do you mean by that?” blustered McArthur, as Ned and myself glanced at the little man in some surprise, for it seemed to strike us simultaneously that there was a sort of unconscious significance in Mr. Smith’s tone.

Yet it was, perhaps, a mistake, as well as the fancy that McArthur’s bronzed face changed color ever so little, even as the other spoke.

Mr. Smith shrank back in his corner, as though terrified at the other’s threatening manner.

“Indeed, I meant nothing at all, my dear friend,” he answered, in apparent alarm. “I—”

But his protestation was cut short by the sudden and abrupt stoppage of the stage, and a terrified yell from the Krow-boy who drove.

Almost at the same moment a man sprang from either side of the road with a leveled rifle.

“The first one that stirs gets a ball through his head!” said the taller of the two, a heavily-bearded fellow, the very counterpart of the ruffian in a border play.

My own revolver was in the small valise, which held Ned’s and my own worldly goods. Even if I had carried it on my person, it is more than likely that with the muzzle of a rifle staring me full in the face, I should not have attempted to use it.

Ned was unarmed. So, as it then appeared, was the little colporteur. And the valiant McArthur dropped on the bottom of the coach with a cry of terror, which was feebly echoed by Mr. Smith.

In obedience to a gruff command, McArthur handed his revolvers to the smaller of the two road agents, who, seeming to be assured that no weapons were worn by any others of the party, caused us to alight.

Ned and myself submitted to be searched, with the calmness of despair.

We had about us a hundred and fifty sovereigns between us, and a bill of exchange on a bank in Cape Town, which the tall robber took from us, while his companion, with cocked hat and presented rifle, did the intimidating. McArthur alternately raved and swore, as he was relieved of his belt. The little man wrung his hands, and raised his voice in meek supplication, while his spectacled eyes were fixed, as though in a sort of fascination upon the ruffian who held the presented rifle.

“Now, then, gig-lamps, what have you got about you?” was the jocose query.

And little Mr. Smith piteously entreated that the muzzle of the loaded rifle be turned aside from his affrighted face.

“It might go off,” he said, in tremulous tones, “and it makes me so nervous to have a deadly weapon pointed at me. Do, please, take it away!”

With a hoarse laugh the road agent tossed his rifle into the hollow of his arm.

“All right, my little man!” he said, carelessly. “Go ahead, Bill.”

This to his companion, who approached Smith for the purpose of searching him.

Then was a transformation scene, indeed. The small man straightened up like lightning, and with a quickness which seemed almost incredible, shoving his hands in the side pockets of his linen coat, he drew them out with a cocked revolver in each.

Crack! and the shorter ruffian staggered and fell, shot through the heart. Crack! and his astonished companion, with a yell of mingled pain and rage, sprang for his rifle, which lay beside him on the ground; but he was too late.

Before his fingers closed upon his shining barrel he tumbled forward to the earth with a ball through his brain.

The whole affair was over in ten seconds. Mr. Smith repocketed his pistols, and taking off his spectacles, regarded our astonished faces with a benevolent smile.

“Deadly weapons come handy sometimes, after all, gentlemen,” he remarked.

And I noticed a curious change in his voice and manner. So, too, did McArthur, who stood for a moment looking at him with seeming perplexity in the midst of his evident stupefaction.

Meanwhile, Ned, who was of a practical turn, began taking from the capacious pockets of the taller of the two outlaws the valuables and money of which our little company had been despoiled, at the eager suggestion of the two diamond-brokers, who had been literally paralyzed with terror during the entire scene through which we had passed, both of them having been relieved of large amounts.

Of course, they insisted upon receiving their own property first. Then came ours. And, at the same time, from a bit of wash-leather in the same pocket rolled a diamond of such peculiar shape, size and color—for it was one of those rare gems, a perfect rose-diamond—that both Ned and myself uttered a simultaneous cry of astonishment and delight, as well as we might, for it was our stolen diamond.

“You are in luck, gentlemen,” quietly remarked Mr. Smith, who had been watching the whole procedure, while McArthur stood looking on with covetous eyes. “I see that this is the stone that you had stolen from camp some days since. I had a glimpse of it in the morning Mr. Girard here”—nodding at Ned—“was showing it to Jacobs, the broker, on the corner of Krall street. I should know it among a thousand.”

"McArthur, who, with his recovered revolvers which he had buckled on, had assumed his usual air of braggadocio, was heard to express considerable dissatisfaction.

"One diamond is like another," he growled.

And his idea was that under the circumstances the whole had a sort of common interest in this one, to which the brokers gave ready assent.

"I'd like to see any one try to take it!" said Ned, with a dangerous gleam in his eyes.

And little Mr. Smith, nodding approvingly, removed from the dead man's body the money belt of which Mr. McArthur had been deprived.

But instead of handing it to the gentleman, he buckled it about his own waist with an agreeable smile.

"What the deuce does this mean?" yelled McArthur, whose face was purple with rage, when, no less to his own than to our astonishment, his arms were pinioned by the little colporteur, who seemed to have the strength of two ordinary men. And in another instant his wrists were adorned with a pair of shining steel handcuffs.

"It's no use kicking, William," quietly remarked his captor, removing a faded flaxen wig from his own head and exposing to view a short crop of stubby black hair. "I didn't mean to have pulled you till we got to Wellington, but this little affair had, so to speak, precipitated matters a little."

And after we were all again on the route, having left word at the next station as to the disposition of the outlaws' bodies, the pseudo Mr. Smith informed us that the scowling prisoner on the seat opposite, who was kept in bonds by the sight of a cocked revolver in his captor's hands, was one William Hardy, with a dozen aliases, whom he—Dennison Hunt, the then best known detective in England—had followed from Liverpool to the very heart of South Africa, a reward of £1,000 having been offered for his apprehension as principal in a great London bank robbery.

"But I never thought I should be the means of helping you two gents to your lost property," said Mr. Smith, with his customary placid smile, as after the wearisome journey, we alighted in front of the Digger's Retreat at Wellington, with dust begrimed faces and stiffened limbs, four days later.

And, to his credit be it said, the detective would not accept a penny of recompense from either of us.

"The excitement of the little 'scrimmage,' was enough," he said, as we shook hands at parting.

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