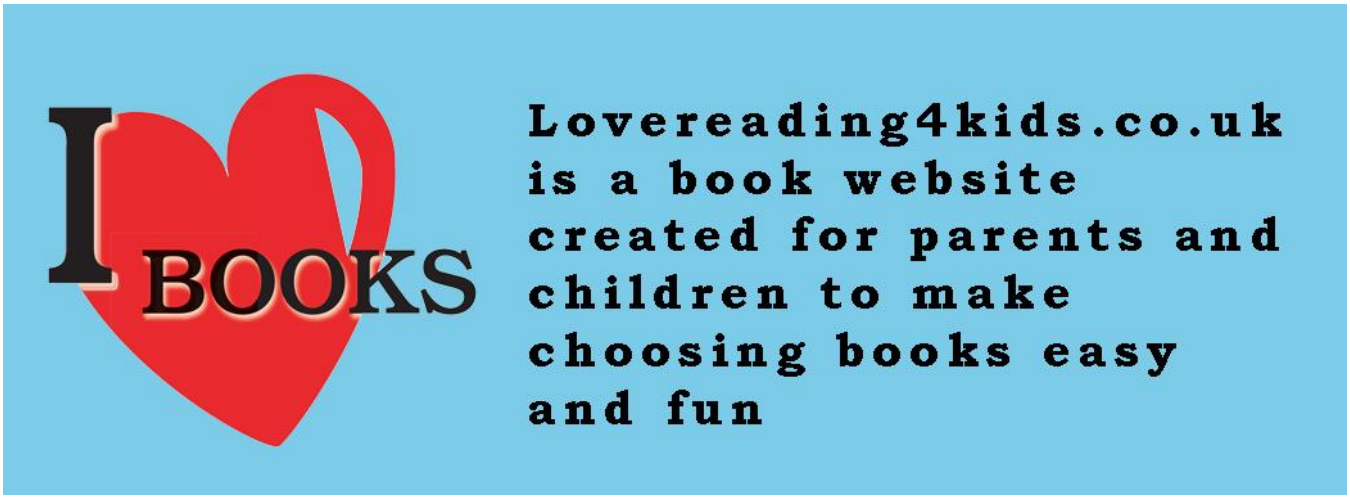


extracts from

The Diamond Brothers in the Falcon's Malteser

Written by

Anthony Horowitz

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THE PACKAGE

There's not much call for private detectives in Fulham.

The day it all started was a bad one. Business was so slack it was falling down all around us. The gas had been disconnected that morning, one of the coldest mornings for twenty years, and it could only be a matter of time before the electricity followed. We'd run out of food and the people in the supermarket downstairs had all fallen about laughing when I suggested credit. We had just £2.37 and about three teaspoons of instant coffee to last us the weekend. The wallpaper was peeling, the carpets were fraying and the curtains … well, whichever way you looked at it, it was curtains for us. Even the cockroaches were walking out.

I was just wondering whether the time hadn't finally come to do something construc-

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tive – like packing my bags and going back to Mum – when the door opened and the dwarf walked in.

OK – maybe you're not supposed to call them dwarves these days. Vertically challenged … that's what it says in the book. But not this book. The truth is, this guy was as challenged as they come. I was only thirteen but already I had six inches on him and the way he looked at me with cold, unforgiving eyes – he knew it and wasn't going to forget it.

He was in his mid forties, I guessed. It was hard to say with someone that size. A short, dark stranger with brown eyes and a snub nose. He was wearing a three-piece suit, only the pieces all belonged to different suits like he'd got dressed in a hurry. His socks didn't match either. A neat moustache crowned his upper lip and his black hair was slicked back with enough oil to interest an Arab. A spotted bow tie and a flashy gold ring completed the picture. It was a weird picture.

"Do come in, Mr…" my brother began.

"Naples," the dwarf, who already was in, said. His name might have come out of Italy but he spoke with a South American accent. "Johnny Naples. You are Tim Diamond?"

"That's me," my brother lied. His real name was Herbert Timothy Simple, but he called himself Tim Diamond. He thought it suited

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his image. "And what can I do for you, Mr Venice?"

"Naples," the dwarf corrected him. He climbed on to a chair and sat down opposite my brother. His nose just reached the level of the desk. Herbert slid a paper-weight out of the way to give his new client a clear view. The dwarf was about to speak but then he paused. The nose was turned on me. "Who is he?" he demanded, the two h's scratching at the back of his throat.

"Him?" Tim smiled. "He's just my kid brother. Don't worry about him, Mr Navels. Just tell me how I can help you."

Naples laid a carefully manicured hand on the desk. His initials – JN – were cut into the ring. There was so much gold around that third finger he could have added his name and address too. "I want to deposit something with you," he said.

"Deposit?" Herbert repeated quite unnecessarily. The dwarf might have had a thick accent, but it certainly wasn't as thick as my brother. "You mean ... like in a bank?" he continued, brilliantly.

The dwarf raised his eyes to the ceiling, took in the crack in the plaster and then, with a sigh, lowered them on to Herbert. "I want to leave a package with you," he said, briskly. "It's much important you look after it. But you must not open it. Just keep it here and

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keep it safe."

"For how long?"

Now the dwarf's eyes darted across to the window. He swallowed hard and loosened his bow tie. I could see that he was scared of something or somebody in the street outside. Either that or he had a thing about double glazing.

"I don't know," he replied. "About a week maybe. I'll come back and collect it … when I can. You give it to nobody else except for me. You understand?"

Naples pulled out a packet of Turkish cigarettes and lit one. The smoke curled upwards, a lurid blue in the chill morning air. My brother flicked a piece of chewing-gum towards his mouth. It missed and disappeared over his shoulder.

"What's in the package?" he asked.

"That's my business," the dwarf said.

"OK. Let's talk about my business then." Herbert treated his client to one of his "Don't mess with me" smiles. It made him look about as menacing as a cow with stomachache. "I'm not cheap," he went on. "If you want a cheap private dick, try looking in the cemetery. You want me to look after your package? It'll cost you."

The dwarf reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the first good thing I'd seen that week: twenty portraits of Her Majesty the Queen, each one printed in brown. In other

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words, a bundle of ten-pound notes, brand new and crisp. "There's two hundred pounds here," he said.

"Two hundred?" Herbert squeaked.

"There will be another hundred when I return and pick up the package. I take it that is sufficient?"

My brother nodded his head, an insane grin on his face. Put him in the back of a car and who'd need a plastic dog?

"Good." The dwarf stubbed out his half-smoked cigarette and slid off the chair. Then he removed a plain brown envelope from another pocket. It was quite thick with something vaguely rectangular bulging in the centre. It rattled faintly as he put it on the desk. "Here is the package," he said. "Once again, look after it, Mr Diamond. With your life. And whatever you do, don't open it."

"You can trust me, Mr Nipples," my brother muttered. "Your package is in safe hands." He waved one of the safe hands to illustrate the point, sending a mug of coffee flying. "What happens if I need to get in touch with you?" he asked as an afterthought.

"You don't," Naples snapped. "I get in touch with you."

"Well there's no need to be touchy," Herbert said.

It was then that a car in the street backfired. The dwarf seemed to evaporate. One moment

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he was standing beside the desk. The next he was crouching beneath it, one hand inside his jacket. And somehow I knew that his finger wasn't wrapped round another bundle of money. For about thirty seconds nobody moved. Then Naples slid across to the window, standing to one side so that he could look out without being seen. He had to stand on tip-toe to do it, his hands perched on the sill, the side of his face pressed against the glass. When he turned round, he left a damp circle on the window. Hair oil and sweat.

"I'll see you again in a week," he said. He made for the door as fast as his legs could carry him. With his legs, that wasn't too fast. "Look after that package with your life, Mr Diamond," he repeated. "And I mean ... your life."

And then he was gone.

My brother was jubilant. "Two hundred pounds just for looking after an envelope," he crowed. "This is my lucky day. This is the best thing that's happened to me this year." He glanced at the package. "I wonder what's in it?" he murmured. "Still, that needn't worry us. As far as we're concerned, there's no problem."

That's what Herbert thought. But right from the start I wasn't so sure. I mean, two hundred pounds is two hundred pounds, and when you're throwing that sort of money

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around there's got to be a good reason. And I remembered the dwarf's face when the car backfired. He may have been a small guy, but he seemed to be expecting big trouble.

Just how big I was to find out soon enough.

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