

number, and went back into the Edgeware-road.

At a convenient pawnbroker's he overhauled a choice selection of revolvers, chose a lilliputian one that had a few cartridges in its mahogany case and paid for it. In a sheltering alley he loaded the weapon, pocketed the balance of the ammunition, and threw the case away. A minute later he was knocking at the door which had received Mademoiselle Mystery.

## CHAPTER III

## A Family Party

A slatternly female opened to his summons.

"I wish to see the lady who has just come in," said Hannibal Mannering. "Tell her a gentleman has called with a message from Westminster."

The old dame asked him over the threshold, and took herself upstairs. The Home Secretary waited, wrapping his weapon skillfully in his handkerchief, and slipping it into his left sleeve. The trigger was very stiff; he risked leaving the pistol at full cock.

A cracked voice called to him over the bannisters to come up. He acted on the suggestion, and found himself in a comfortably furnished, brightly illuminated apartment.

"Mrs. Moss will see you in a moment," said his guide, and went out, shutting the door behind her.

Hannibal Mannering's pulses beat quickly; he felt that he was indeed on the track of the blue diamond. He chose a corner seat that had no door or cupboard behind it, and having thus entrenched himself in a strategic position, possessed his soul in patience.

Presently "Mademoiselle Mystery" herself entered. She was still wearing the highly effective costume of amber satin. A look of absolute amazement crossed her face as she beheld him. The Home Secretary felt that he had gained a point—he had shown this extremely cool person that he could out-manoeuvre her.

"You see I changed my mind," he said. "But how—how did you know?"

"Easily enough, Mrs. Moss," replied Hannibal Mannering, "too easily in fact, to be worth discussing. Let us talk about my diamond. You have it here?"

"I did not say so," parried Mademoiselle Mystery. But she had experienced a second shock of surprise at the surname which he had employed.

"You told me recently to be sensible," pursued the Home Secretary, "now I tell you the same. I know that your husband stole my pin, that he sent you to act as go-between in his project of reselling it to me. Though why he has chosen to risk his liberty and reputation over a beggarly three thousand passes my comprehension."

The dark-haired beauty smiled again. "What do you intend doing?" she asked, "having been clever enough to find all this out?"

"These are my terms," said Hannibal Mannering, resolutely. "Moss must restore the pin, confess his folly to Goswell and the Speaker, attribute it to an attack of kleptomania—though I should say bankruptcy would be a better word, judging from the surroundings for which he has abandoned his bachelor establishment—and after a decorous interval, resign. On these conditions I will satisfy myself with a simple announcement that the affair has been cleared up."

"And if we refuse?"

"Then," said the Home Secretary, "I shall be reluctantly compelled to have recourse to the law, both to regain my property, and to rid the House of a scoundrel."

"Mrs. Moss laughed shrilly. "To do that," she told him, "you would have to communicate with the law, and at present you are our prisoner, should we care to make you so."

"Indeed," said Hannibal Mannering, "and how do you imagine that would effect the issue?"

"We should bore you into submission," responded Mrs. Moss, showing her white teeth. "Besides, you are badly needed just now in the Parliament, and if you don't turn up, the Opposition will make hash of your great Bill."

"I must decline to discuss the matter any further with you, Mrs. Moss," said the Home Secretary. "You know my decision—kindly acquaint your husband with it. I shall trust to hear from him

some time tomorrow. Till then I will take no action of any sort." And Hannibal Mannering made as if to go.

Mrs. Moss ran to the other side of the room, and laid her hand on the knob of a drawer. But the Cabinet Minister had levelled his revolver at her.

"Leave that alone," he said, "or I fire; scream, and I send your landlady for the police. Sit down, you mad creature, don't you understand you're not dealing with a child?"

The reckless beauty surrendered, biting her full lower lip with her white teeth, and flashing her eyes at him tigerishly.

"Now, he pursued, "give me my pin. Tomorrow I will see Moss and arrange that the matter shall be hushed up for the sake of the House and the Party."

"I—I haven't got it," said Mrs. Moss not without a certain triumph.

"You know where it is then," persisted Hannibal Mannering.

"At present I don't even know that," rejoined the dark beauty, knitting her delicate fingers ferociously.

"Then I must ring for somebody or other and send to summon a constable."

"Do," observed Mrs. Moss, "it will make nice reading in the morning papers."

The Home Secretary paused. A heavy step was ascending the stairs without; it neared the room door. The handle turned, and upon the threshold appeared Mr. Aviragous Moss.

Hannibal Mannering spoke to him sharply, giving him no time for surprise.

"Sit down on that sofa," he ordered, keeping his revolver swinging in a strategic segment of a circle, "then I can have my eye on you both."

"Good gracious Mannering, you here! How is this?" said the gem dealer, with a sickly geniality.

"Bah!" ejaculated the Home Secretary, "hand over my pin without beating about the bush. You see I know everything."

"But, my dear fellow," said Aviragous Moss, "I haven't got the pin, I tell you."

"I see," concluded Hannibal Mannering, "that I must inevitably ring and send for a constable."

"Good heavens," besought the M.P., "don't—don't be so impatient. I'll—I'll get you the diamond, or, at least, one like it. Only give me time."

"Not another second," flamed the Cabinet Minister, "my patience is at an end." And he seized the bell-rope with his left hand.

"For goodness sake, Kitty," moaned Aviragous Moss, "own up. You've got the pin for all you denied it to me so stiffly at Westminster. I wasn't fool enough to believe you for more than a minute. That's why I came along here."

"I've not got the pin, Avy darling," said Mrs. Moss sweetly.

Completely exasperated, Hannibal Mannering plucked at the cord by his side. A bell rang in the lower regions, and at the same second the knocker on the front door sounded loudly. The knock was answered in preference to the ring. Someone entered, mounted hurriedly the steep flight of stairs, and burst into the room.

"Well, Kit, what's the news?" cried a voice.

The Home Secretary blinked incredulously. Before him stood a perfect copy of Aviragous Moss, the same pink skin, the same flabby embonpoint, the same tall figure. A light broke in upon the Cabinet Minister's soul. He fled to the door, slammed it, set his back against it, and levelled the indispensable revolver.

"Hands up, you, sir!" he cautioned the new comer.

The reply was an oath, and a plunge towards the bureau from which Mrs. Moss had been driven vi et armis a few moments before. But Aviragous Moss flung himself upon his double.

"Guiderous," he shrieked, "are you mad?—leave it to me."

Thus adjured the other dropped moodily into a seat.

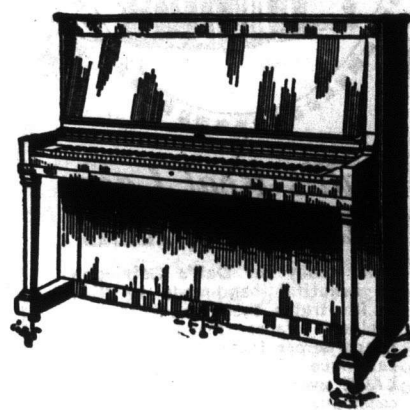
Aviragous Moss pointed to him.

"That, Mr. Mannering," he said, despondently, "is my twin brother—my brother Guiderous, so named with me after some character, in a play of Shakespeare's. He is one of the most lovely blackguards in Europe, and Kitty here is a good second. For years I have been bled by him to the tune of several hundreds annually. The scandals caused by him that I have hushed up for my own sake would fill an entire number of the Times. He got me away to-night from the House

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