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"Lopes and Goswell were with me on the Treasury Bench," answered Hannibal Mannering drily, "and saw me speak to you."

The diamond merchant cowered in his fright.

"There's a terrible mistake somewhere," he groaned, "but for pity's sake don't bring such a charge against me—I'll get you another stone like it if I can, though heaven knows where I am to search for one. I'll spend half my fortune, Mannering, if you'll only give me time—don't, don't ruin me!"

"Restore the pin, then," offered the Secretary, relenting, "and ask for the Chiltern Hundreds, and I'll do my best to let you down easily. But after my action to-night, I must justify myself to some extent."

"I tell you I haven't got the pin," cried the M.P. "How can I have what I never had?"

Hannibal Mannering turned on his heel.

"Since you take that line," he retorted, "I have nothing further to say." And he went off down the corridor, leaving the diamond merchant alone. Aviragous Moss mopped his pink forehead with an enormous silk handkerchief. He was shaking in every limb.

A messenger intercepted the Home Secretary's progress.

"Please, sir," he said, "a lady wishes to see you," and he held out the slip of paper familiar to applicants at St. Stephen's Hall. It bore a name, a West End address, and, in the last space of the docket, the words "Private and important."

Hannibal Mannering looked at the white square. "Ask Mr. Roberts to see her for me," he instructed. Roberts was his own secretary, a discreet young Welshman.

"Yes, sir," replied the attendant, and went off along the corridor. The Home Secretary resigned himself to a throng of sympathetic inquirers. The youthful Roberts, returning from the prescribed interview, rescued his chief politely.

"That lady you sent me to see, sir," he said.

"Well?" demanded Hannibal Mannering, impatiently.

"Extraordinary as it seems, sir," reported the young Welshman, "she knows something about your pin, but I could get nothing precise out of her; she insists on seeing you."

"What class does she belong to?" demanded his chief.

Roberts pursed his shrewd lips.

"She's not a Vere de Vere," he decided, "but she's a very good imitation. Tall and dark, evening dress, strikingly handsome."

Hannibal Mannering shrugged his shoulders.

"Odd, extremely," he admitted. "Very well, Roberts, I'll have a look at her."

He went through to St. Stephen's Hall, and the constable called his name. A lady stepped forward—a handsome, black-browed beauty, in amber satin and a splendid opera cloak. The Home Secretary raised his hat. "I'm afraid I haven't the pleasure," he said.

"I have already given one nom de guerre," objected a pair of humorous lips. "However, I will be more honest with you, Mr. Mannering; you shall call me Mystery. You have lost a certain article of value; I come to treat for its return."

Hannibal Mannering gazed at her irresolutely.

"You are wondering no doubt," went on his visitor, gaily, "whether you should not call one of those fat policemen and have me arrested. But, consider, I am only a woman, a frail, delicate woman, with a charming figure and a pretty frock. I shall deny all you say; you will find out nothing, and you will get yourself laughed at into the bargain. Tell me, do you want your diamond back?"

"Naturally," responded the surprised politician.

"Then," responded the lady in the amber frock, "get into my carriage and I will take you to those who have power to arrange terms."

"No, thank you, Mademoiselle Mystery," said Hannibal Mannering, "you would be wanting a ransom for me next."

Mademoiselle Mystery frowned.

"You shall be as safe as on the Treasury Bench," she promised.

"My pin, it appears, was not safe even there," demurred the Secretary, "so your comparison is a bad one. No, if you will state your terms here and now, I

will give them my immediate attention."

"Three thousand pounds, and no questions asked," he was told abruptly.

Hannibal Mannering winced.

"My answer is 'No'," he said crisply.

"The diamond is worth five," protested the beauty, settling her cloak over her gleaming shoulders.

"I was not contemplating the question of price," said the Home Secretary. "In my annoyance at having the jewel so impudently stolen from me in the House itself, and so obviously by a member, I called the Speaker's attention to my loss."

Incidentally, I may remark that I believe myself able to identify the probable criminal, though I must admit that I did not consider him ingenious enough to choose as his accomplice in his crime, a woman, nor did I anticipate his being sufficiently insolent to offer me the refusal of my own property. However, his device is useless; the publicity of my proceedings in the House to-night demands that I should substantiate at least in some measure the charge I made."

"That cannot be thought of for a moment," snapped the red lips.

"Then the matter must remain in the hands of the police," retorted Hannibal Mannering, and turned from the fair negotiator.

"No, no!" she cried, you must be sensible. We have counted all along upon your looking at it in a common sense fashion. Do as we wish, and you can have your pin back in an hour. What is two or three thousand to you?"

"I have already observed," persisted the Home Secretary, "that the question of money has nothing to do with it."

Mademoiselle Mystery, as he had called her, stamped her foot impatiently.

"Very well," she said, "I must leave you to it, I suppose, but you will never be able to prove anything, and you won't even have your diamond back to comfort you. Good-bye, Mr. Mannering; don't have me followed, it really isn't worth it—I have taken all precautions."

She bowed, and went across the Hall. As she did so, Mr. Aviragous Moss, coming from the inner lobby, met her face to face. The Home Secretary saw that he halted and looked at her fixedly. Mademoiselle Mystery tossed her handsome head, and passed towards the doors which led to the public entrance. Mr. Moss hurried after and spoke to her. She paused fretfully, and exchanged a few words with him.

Hannibal Mannering struck by an idea hastened into the interior of the House, threaded the corridors at something like a trot, got into the Palace Yard by the members' exit, and went round to the front of St. Stephen's House. A stylish brougham and pair were waiting at the pavement edge, the November fog eddying about the lighted lamps and steaming bays. A cautious glimpse into the Hall itself showed Mannering that Moss and the dark-haired beauty were still in conversation. The Home Secretary strode to a neighboring stand and chartered a hansom.

"Follow that brougham as soon as it moves off," he ordered, "and hang on to it like grim death."

The order being supported by a sovereign the Jehu nodded, and took up his whip. Hannibal Mannering got in, and strained his eyes to see if, as he suspected, the carriage was indeed that of Mademoiselle Mystery.

Yes, he was right; she came running down the steps, and sprang into the brougham as a constable opened the door. The bays went off at a daring pace, so did the dappled grey in the Home Secretary's cab. But the fog was thick, and neither could long achieve an exceptional rate of speed.

From Westminster to Maida Vale the two vehicles kept closely together. At last in a gloomy part of the latter thoroughfare, the brougham drew in to the kerb, and for a single instant slackened speed. The apron of the hansom had been left open by its fare. He leaned forward then leapt out and dived into the fog. During its momentary pause, a dark-robed shape had stepped out of the brougham and darted down a side street. The Home Secretary followed it.

Under a caught-up mackintosh he perceived a flutter of amber skirts, and knew that he had not been led astray. Tracking his prey with rapid caution, he marked her entry at an unlighted door in a dingy thoroughfare, noted the