

The Loss of the Blue Diamond

Written for The Western Home Monthly by W. R. Gilbert

CHAPTER I

How It Disappeared

THE Rt. Hon. Hannibal Mannering, one of His Britannic Majesty's Secretaries of State, was an immensely clever man. Nature gave him brains, good fortune made him a pillar of the Government and a popular idol. Even his hobby—for he was far too notable a person to be able to dispense with a "weakness"—had been lucky enough to seize upon the public interest, and during the fifteen years of his political life it had been paragraphed in every language of the globe. What his collars were to a certain great statesman, Hannibal Mannering's breastpins were to him.

Breastpins of gold, breastpins of silver, breastpins with heads of turquoise, ruby, sapphire, emerald, opal; breastpins with histories and without; breastpins made from jewels worn by kings upon the scaffold or taken from some world-famous shrine; breastpins with priceless cameos—Mr. Mannering's collection was invaluable and unique. Every afternoon during the Session, as he took his seat in the House, the reporters in the Press Gallery strained their eyes to discover, for the information of a curious public, which of his many treasures Mr. Mannering had donned.

Chief among his varied stock of these costly trifles was a pin mounting a magnificent blue diamond, of a size, lustre, and brilliance, believed to be without parallel in the world. When, with his gem in his ample scarf, he took his seat on the Treasury Bench, he seemed to have three eyes of a twinkling, scintillating azure—those under his bushy brows and sloping forehead; the third, that glittering star which winked and shimmered on his breast.

Among the admirers of Mr. Mannering's collection in general, and of the blue diamond in particular, was Mr. Aviragous Moss, the member for West Holborn, principal partner in the Hatton Garden diamond firm of Moss, Moss Lowenfield. He had been instrumental in obtaining for the Home Secretary some of the finest of his pins, and had given expert advice upon the purchasing of many others. The blue diamond, alas, had not only been bought elsewhere, but in obtaining it, at a fabulous sum, Mr. Mannering had unwittingly been bidding against Mr. Moss, who had been privately treating for the same stone on behalf of a foreign potentate. But Hannibal Mannering named a tempting price, and before Mr. Moss could ask his august client's permission to cover it, the owner of the jewel had closed with the offer, and the Home Secretary was victorious.

The great gem-dealer accepted his defeat philosophically enough, but it became a stock jest in the lobbies that Moss always turned green when Mr. Mannering sported his blue diamond. However, if it were still true that he coveted the stone, he sat immediately behind the Home Secretary, and, failing the discovery of spectacles with properties resembling those of the Röntgen rays, he could not, if he would, have feasted his hungry gaze upon the jewel in the fashion suggested by the wits of the smoking-room.

It will be remembered by many that the Home Secretary wore the pin in question upon the night of his extremely bitter and able reply to the Radical criticism of his Re-housing Bill. When he sat down, assuming, as was his custom, a drowsy calm, he leaned back in his seat, crossed his legs, and closed his eyes. Five minutes later an Irish member was in the thick of a tussle with the Speaker, and the House was rocking with excitement. But few noticed that during the altercation Mr. Mannering had roused himself, and was carrying on a whispered conversation with his neighbors to right and left and at his back. When the fighting Irishman had made his peace, and the tumult was subdued, Mr. Mannering got up, white, and trembling, apparently with passion.

"Mr. Speaker," he said, nervously, "I—I have to claim your protection from what is either an atrociously foolish practical joke, or an outrage on the decency of this House. When I sat down after last addressing you, sir, I was wearing a breastpin of some value. Honourable members may be acquainted

with my possibly unreasonable interest in this particular class of ornament. That I entered the precincts of the House with the article in question actually in my possession, my honourable friends the Leader of the House and the Chancellor of the Exchequer can testify; the latter of whom noticed as I sat down that I had, with its assistance, arranged my scarf in a somewhat novel fashion."

A dead silence reigned in the puzzled audience, yet a thrill of indescribable agitation pervaded it.

"A few moments ago," continued the Home Secretary, "I was astounded to discover that I was no longer the owner of the pin—a gold one, with a favourite blue diamond head. Honourable members around me repudiate any knowledge of its disappearance, and allege most seriously that neither in a spirit of playfulness nor out of any other motive have they abstracted the missing article, which, however, is not to be found in any immediate vicinity. I am therefore compelled, Mr. Speaker, to solicit your intervention."

The Speaker gasped. "While I deeply regret the untoward incident to which the member for Leasowes has called my attention," he stammered, "I fear that neither the House nor myself has power to enter into an inquisition upon the persons or the integrity of honourable members individually."

"Then," said the Home Secretary, rising fiercely, "I have no alternative but to place the matter in other hands." And with this ominous remark he strode out of the House. The Commons poured excitedly into the lobbies, buzzing like a swarm of bees; a sensible member of the Government put up a rank-and-file M.P. to provoke a count-out, and the sitting terminated abruptly.

CHAPTER II.

"Mademoiselle Mystery."

For half an hour the Home Secretary fretted in his private room, then he sprang from his chair and marched into the corridor, to meet, as fate would have it, no less a person than Mr. Aviragous Moss, the Hatton Garden diamond merchant—a stout figure in a padded frock and curly silk hat. He greeted Mr. Mannering fussily.

"My dear fellow," he began, "allow me to condole you on your loss. Everybody is shocked that it should have occurred among—er!—among such an assembly as this. May it not be possible that the whole affair is an accident? You have such a vigorous style, you know, the pin may have worked loose when you were pitching into the Opposition. It might easily have fallen out and rolled away unperceived while the attention of the House was riveted upon your arguments. Eh, don't you think so?" And he rubbed his fat hands inquiringly.

The Home Secretary scowled at the questioner.

"How far do you suppose it will roll," he asked, with chilling emphasis, "as far as Beluchistan—the Ameer might be offered it before he could hear of the way in which it was obtained."

"Good gracious, Mannering!" cried the gem dealer, "what do you mean?"

"I mean," snarled the other, "that you have always wanted that stone—why, man! its common gossip that the Ameer has doubled his limit since I bought the thing. You yourself guaranteed me fifty per cent profit if I would sell."

"I don't understand," said Mr. Moss, growing livid, as he peered into the scornful face of the Home Secretary.

"Pshaw! retorted Hannibal Mannering, "who should understand better than you. You have sat immediately behind me every night since the Session opened—you who sat behind me to-night."

Aviragous Moss tottered. "Great heavens, Mannering!" he whispered, "you don't mean that. You'll ruin me body and soul if you breathe that where anyone but us two can hear it. Besides, I—I wasn't in the House when you found the diamond was lost; I've only heard about it."

"An alibi, eh?" sneered the Home Secretary; "and where were you, may I ask?"

"I—I can't say," gurgled the terrified Moss, "but I'll swear I wasn't in the House to-night during the sitting."



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