

The Annexation Society

OR THE ADVENTURES OF JIMMIE TRICKETT.

BY J. S. FLETCHER.

The first instalment of this story finds the Marquis of Scraye at his historic country seat in England much bewildered over the sudden and mysterious disappearance of the Tsar's Golden Cross, which was a relique presented to his grandfather by the Tsar of Russia. The Cross was kept in a cabinet in Queen Elizabeth's room, made famous by visits from the great Queen to the Scrayes. To solve the mystery the Marquis wires to Nicholson Packe, a novelist friend in London, to meet him at Brycheste Station. Packe takes with him his clever friend Jimmie Trickett, whose adventures form a considerable part of the story to follow.

CHAPTER IV. Secret Theft.

PACKE laid down his knife and fork and stared at his host with eyes full of wonder. "What!" he exclaimed. "Your own guest?"

Scraye frowned, nodded, and let his features relax into a sardonic smile. "My own guest!" he answered. "My own guest! What's more, I'd lay any man a thousand pounds to a bad shilling that she's got it. Packe—I'm certain."

Packe picked up his knife and fork again and went on eating.

"Oh, well!" he said, after a period of silence, "I suppose you know your guests. But, by Gad, you know, Scraye, that's a serious charge to bring against a woman."

"I'm not the sort to bring a charge against anybody without good grounds, and unless I'm absolutely persuaded that I'm right," said Scraye, stoutly. "I'm sure I'm right in this case. If I'm wrong—if that woman hasn't stolen my cross—if she hasn't it in her possession or where she can lay hands on it, then I'll never be certain of anything in my life again! I repeat, Packe—I'm certain. Certain!"

"Grounds for your certainty?" asked Packe.

"I'm going to give them," answered Scraye. "Now, first of all, you don't know Mrs. X.—for fear of any possible eavesdroppers, we'll refer to the lady as Mrs. X.—I repeat, you don't know her, and you haven't heard of her?"

"I don't know of her. I may have heard of her—may have read of her in such society news as I do read. Her name doesn't suggest anything to me at present, anyhow."

"Well, she's a pretty well-known society woman anyway. She's a widow—her husband was in the diplomatic service. He was some relation of Lord Bennington's, and she belongs to the Greycastle family. She's a woman who's travelled a lot. She's one of the most expert bridge-players in England. She possesses a fine soprano voice. She's a born teller of good stories. She's full of go, and she's clever enough to be a woman's woman as well as a man's woman. She's always perfectly gowned, and she's never dull. And, consequently, she gets more invitations to places than any other woman in society. I've been meeting her everywhere for the last three years, and she's the life and soul of every house she goes into."

"An attractive personality," said Packe. "I'm becoming deeply interested in her."

"You'll be more so before we've done. Now, as you are aware, Mrs. X. is at this time one of a house-party which I've got at Scraye. It's only a small party—eight of 'em altogether. It's the first time she's ever been at Scraye—odd that I never asked her before. Very good—now we diverge to another path—a side-path which leads up to a peculiarity attaching to my family. You mayn't know it, Packe, but we Scrayes have

been celebrated for hundreds of years—there are lots of references to it in the family archives, at least I'm told so by the librarian at Scraye—for a remarkable keenness of smell. Our olfactory powers are developed abnormally. I am making no boast when I assure you that I can smell violets, for instance, half a mile away from the lane or wood in which they are growing."

"Remarkable, indeed!" said Packe. "I suppose it's sometimes useful to have such an unusual development—you'd be able to smell an outbreak of fire, for instance, as soon as it started?"

"I could certainly do that. Well, now, when I went to the Queen's Chamber this morning, I naturally put my head into the cabinet. I immediately recognized a certain very delicate, subtle perfume—the perfume of a preparation obtained by distilling a number of Eastern flowers. It is a very subtle, elusive perfume—I dare say no ordinary nose would have caught it. Mine did. I recognized it instantly. I knew it with as much infallible certainty as I know the sight of my own hand. Also I knew that of all my acquaintances there is only one person who ever uses that perfume—she imports it, at considerable cost, from Teheran. That person is—Mrs. X."

SCRAYE looked at Packe with something of a triumph as he spoke the last words. But Packe shook his head.

"No proof!" he said. "As Mrs. X. is a member of your house-party and has been in the house some days, she may have been in the neighbourhood of that cabinet several times, and—"

Scraye lifted a finger. "Wrong!" he said. "She hasn't. The day after my house-party assembled, I myself took those of them—only three—who'd never been to Scraye before round the state chambers. I'm absolutely certain that Mrs. X. has never been in them since until—last night. When she was in them, with me and the other two—we didn't open the cabinet—we looked at the things through the glass door. None of the three were much interested in those things; they were much more interested in the old furniture and the tapestry. I'm right, Packe!"

"Well—and what next?" said Packe. "This—and it's of the highest importance. As soon as I recognized the delicate odour of that perfume I saw that I'd got to think quickly—just about as quickly as ever I did in my life. And I did think quickly! I compressed an awful lot of thought into the few minutes which elapsed between my making that discovery and wiring for you. And now just a moment until these waiters have been in and set us to rights again, and then I'll tell you what will probably surprise you more than anything I've told you up to now."

Packe waited, thinking wonderingly of the woman whom he had seen chatting with such vivacity to her companion as they crossed the sunlit close outside. She was a handsome woman, a pretty woman; the sort of woman that all men admire; through the open window he had caught the sound of her clear voice and merry laughter. Was it possible that such a woman could be a thief; that such a woman could steal from the house in which she was a guest; that she could laugh and jest, knowing that she had betrayed hospitality? If so, then there were surely mysteries in human nature more complex, stranger than in the world of intrigue and of crime; perhaps he was on the threshold of one? And suddenly he thought of

Jimmie Trickett, practical, downright, unimaginative, who was doubtless indulging a healthy appetite for cold roast beef and bitter beer in the coffee-room, and he laughed.

"Now then, we'll proceed," said Scraye, when the waiters had once more left them alone. "And as I said just now, Packe, I think you'll be more surprised by what I'm going to tell you than by what I have told you. I said I'd got to think quickly this morning. So I had. The thinking, however, wasn't so much thinking as recalling certain affairs. Now, look here—I daresay, as a professional weaver of stories connected with crime, you keep a pretty sharp look out on the papers, with an idea of getting notions about murders, burglaries, and so on?"

PACKE admitted the truth of the insinuation with a silent nod.

"And so, of course, you're familiar with the facts of, say, most of the big robberies of late years," continued Scraye. "But I'll tell you of something you don't know, of something that's never been made public. You may be surprised to learn that during the last three years there have been robberies in some of the big houses in England and Scotland which were certainly of the character of that which occurred at Scraye last night."

"You mean of heirlooms and that sort of thing?" asked Packe.

"Precisely. Heirlooms, and that sort of thing. That's a fact—though, I tell you, it's not known to the public. Indeed, it's only known to a few people. I'll particularise. There was the case of the famous miniature of Mary, Queen of Scots, which has been in the family of the Duke of Strathdonan ever since the time of James the First, who is said to have given it to the first Duke. That disappeared most mysteriously. It's never been heard of since."

"Have inquiries been made?" asked Packe.

"Wait a little—I'll tell you about that later. Let me go on with my catalogue of crime. That's only one instance. Another was the case of Lord Dillflower's famous first folio of Shakespeare which disappeared from his library one day about fifteen months ago. Yet another was the abstraction of a certain very fine example of Meissonier's work—a small battle-piece, about a foot square—which was quietly abstracted from Sir Ralph Curtis-Wyatt's gallery a year since. You see, Packe, in all these cases it is always something small, something easily taken, something easily conveyed away and hidden for the time being, which forms the object of these thefts. Now, I've given you three instances. I'll give you another before we come back to the one which most closely concerns me. Last spring I was staying for a few days with Mr. Godenham, in Worcestershire—I don't know whether you know him or not, but he's a great collector of antiquities, curiosities, and objects of vertu. He possessed a certain wonderful jewelled chalice, which, according to good experts, had belonged to Glastonbury Abbey, and dated, it is believed, from the time of St. Dunstan. That disappeared during the time I was staying in the house. And—now listen!—I remembered this morning that the lady to whom we are referring as Mrs. X. was also a member of Godenham's house-party. What do you say to that, Packe?"

"What I say at present," replied Packe, "is that I should like to know what Mr. Godenham said about his loss?"

"Just so. Well, Godenham, like myself, kept the matter very quiet. He happened to be aware of the losses at the Duke of Strathdonan's, and at Lord Dillflower's. He mentioned his loss to me. He had a queer theory. Perhaps—since my own loss of this morning—I'm inclined to agree with it."

"What is it?" asked Packe. "The existence of a theory is of the first importance in a matter of this sort."

"Godenham's theory is this," replied Scraye. "You are doubtless aware that there are collectors in this world whose sole object is mere possession. They don't want to exhibit their collections; they're not keen about gloating over them themselves; all they want is the knowledge that they possess. In plain language, they're obsessed—they're the victims of a species of mania. You know that there are men who believe themselves to be the only possessors of the only copy of some rare edition, for instance? Such men, if they hear of the existence of another copy will spend money like water to get it—only to throw it into the fire as soon as it's theirs. Well, Godenham's theory is that some such maniac as these is at the bottom of these thefts—probably some American collector, who wants to possess himself of these notable curios—and who employs agents to procure them."

"Of whom you think Mrs. X. is one?" suggested Packe.

Scraye shrugged his shoulders.

"What does it look like?" he asked.

"I'm certain of the facts concerning my cross—I'm certain she was at Godenham's place when his jewelled chalice was stolen. And—I'm going to get at the bottom of this mystery—somehow. I won't call in the police; I won't employ private detective assistance. I want you to help me. When it's all done, you can spin one of your mystery stories round it."

Packe, who by this time had satisfied his appetite, lighted a cigarette. "Sounds attractive," he said. "But what do you want me to do?"

"This," replied Scraye. "This—to begin with. To-morrow, Mrs. X.'s visit to Scraye comes to an end. She goes to town to-morrow morning by the 10.3 from Brycheste; she arrives at Victoria at 11.52. Now, for certain reasons of my own, I want an accurate observation keeping on her movements during the rest of the morning—say until she goes home to her own house, which, by the by, is in Wilton Crescent. I suggest to you that you should manage that observation."

"You want me to shadow her?" observed Packe.

"Or get some trusted person to do it," answered Scraye. "If you could do it yourself, all the better. I thought—you see—that your ingenious mind would suggest some method by which the thing could be safely done. She doesn't know you; at least, we think so—and—"

"I can manage it—with help," said Packe, ruminatively. "I think I see a way. But I shall want help. And the man who can give me that help is downstairs—Jimmie Trickett. Look here, Scraye—do you mind letting Trickett into all this? I can already see how he'll be of the greatest help."

"He's safe—he's to be trusted?" asked Scraye.

"Answer for him with my life," responded Packe. "And he's practical and full of common sense."

"Then," said Scraye, "ask him to join us at once."

CHAPTER V. Pursuit.

DULY called into conference over coffee and cigars, Jimmie Trickett listened to the Marquis of Scraye's recital of the matter in hand with a countenance which was impassive almost to the point of stolidity. At the end he turned to Packe with a business-like nod.

"We can do that on our heads, Packe," he said lightly. "That is, if you'll play up to me."

"What do you suggest, Jimmie?" asked Packe.

"A plain thing," answered Trickett. "You say the lady arrives at Victoria at 11.52 to-morrow morning? Very good. At 11.45 to-morrow morning