

The Annexation Society

(Continued from page 14.)

it's in books or in real life, there isn't any mystery about any of these things when you get to the bottom of 'em."

"When you get to the bottom of 'em, there isn't," agreed Packe. "But it's getting to the bottom of 'em, my son. Now, frankly, when you were reading my last novel, did you really know who the murderer was until you got to the last chapter?"

"No," answered Trickett, "but when I got to the last chapter I thought I was an awful ass that I hadn't spotted him long before."

Packe laughed with genuine amusement at his guest's disingenuousness.

"Maybe you'll run up against a full-blooded mystery in real life one of these days, Jimmie," he said. "I know of one or two now that would take some solving. There's one outside this very house. Do you know that for thirty years a certain man—you can see him for yourself any morning—has come every day, Sundays included, at exactly twelve o'clock, to the corner of this street, where it runs into St. James' Square, and has paced up and down a certain stretch of pavement for precisely half an hour and then gone away. Who is he? What does he come for? Why does he pace and repace the very same bit of street? Who knows what his object is, what he's thinking, what the whole thing amounts to? Come!"

"Why not ask him?" suggested Trickett.

"That's just what one can't do, my son! If you could go straight up to a mystery and ask it to explain itself, why, then—"

"There wouldn't be any mystery in it, of course," said Trickett. "And that's what I say. There isn't any mystery, when you've got to the bottom of it. For example, there's no mystery about this mysterious chap you're telling about, in his own mind. He knows what he's after. If you spoke to him he'd probably tell you that he came there and did his performance because he liked to, unless he told you to mind your own business. I guess you can make mysteries out of nothing, and—"

At that moment Hollis came back with another telegram in his hand, saying that it had just been delivered. Packe tore the envelope open, and immediately began to frown over the message. He looked across at his guest at last, and he laughed.

"Perhaps you'll say this isn't mysterious, Jimmie," he said. "This is a second wire from the same source. Just listen:

"I hope this will catch you before you leave. By whatever means you come to Brychester, whether by train or motor, don't show yourself in the principal streets if you can help it. If you come to the station, take the narrow alley round by the cloisters and the cathedral and make the 'Salutation' by the side door. If by motor, drive up the side lanes to the back stable yard entrance and come down the yard. I shall be waiting lunch for you in the Waterloo private parlour.

"SCRAYE."

"What do you say to that, Jimmie Trickett?" continued Packe. "Is there mystery in that, or isn't there? Come, now!"

Trickett rose and felt for his cigarette case.

"What I say," he answered, "is short and sweet. The car's outside, and it's ready."

CHAPTER III.

The Lady in the Close.

THE Salutation Hotel at Brychester is one of those ancient hostels which were once a feature of English highroad life and are now rapidly disappearing or being transformed out of all recognition by the changed conditions of things. In the old days, when folk were content to journey at the rate of sixty miles a day its rooms used to be full of guests and its stables full of horses; now its great coffee-room rarely sees more than a dozen people at a time, and grass grows in the stalls which were

never empty of horse-flesh. Room after room in this old house is never used, never, indeed, opened save at race-meeting times or when the Yeomanry come up for their annual training; what trade is done in the place could well be carried on in a quarter of its ample dimensions. Nevertheless there it stands in the heart of the old city, maintaining its outward aspect of old-worldliness under the protecting shade of the great cathedral which saw it built and will probably see it pulled down to be replaced by something more in accordance with twentieth-century notions.

Nicholson Packe, piloted by Jimmie Trickett into the stable-yard of the "Salutation" at precisely two o'clock, was quick to espy the well-known figure of the old head-waiter hanging about the back door of the hotel. He sprang out of the car, throwing off his travelling coat.

"Now, Jimmie," he said, "let's arrange matters. You'll lunch at once, of course, and you'll be somewhere about—coffee-room or smoking-room, afterwards. I've a sort of notion that you may be wanted—a sort of intuitive feeling that you haven't come down here for nothing, you know. So don't run away, there's a good boy."

"When you want me, you'll find me," answered Trickett. "I reckon there's nothing to run away to in this place. Go and find out what your precious mystery is."

PACKE walked quickly down the yard, to be received with smiles and bows by the head-waiter, who knew him of old.

"His lordship's waiting for you in Waterloo, sir," he whispered confidentially. "This way, sir."

He led the way up one flight of stairs, down another, up a third, along one desolate corridor, across another, and finally ushered Packe into a snug private parlour where windows looked upon the Cathedral Close. There, with his back warming at the fire and his eyes fixed meditatively on the luncheon table, stood the Marquis of Scraye, who seemed pleasantly relieved when Packe walked in and the head-waiter shut the door on him.

"What on earth is all this mystery?" demanded Packe as the two young men shook hands. "Why am I to sneak into Brychester by the back entrance?"

Scraye jerked a thumb at the window.

"Popular novelists," he remarked sententiously, are not unknown, either to fame or to sight. They have their portraits in the papers; a lot of people know them whom they don't know. I didn't want certain persons—or at any rate a certain person—to see you in Brychester this morning, Packe—that's why. How did you come?"

"Jimmie Trickett ran me down in his car," replied Packe. "We did it to the minute and kept a yard under the regulation twenty miles all the way."

"And who," asked Scraye, "is Jimmie Trickett? Friend?"

"I thought you knew everybody," said Packe. "Jimmie Trickett is the fortunate possessor of the world-famous remedy known as Trickett's Tabloids—patent medicine, you know. Old Trickett—now gathered to his forebears—left it to him; it brings him in about twenty thousand a year. So Jimmie's a guileless and amiable youth about town, and a real good sort—you ought to know him, Scraye; he'd amuse you."

"Then bring him up to lunch," said Scraye. "You and I can talk afterwards."

"No—we'll talk first," answered Packe. "Jimmie's all right in the coffee-room; you can see him later. Now, what is all this? Something, of course, or you wouldn't be indulging in all this hole-and-corner work."

"Something!" exclaimed Scraye. "Something? By Gad!—I think so. Something that you can exercise your wits upon. But not a word until we've lunched—then you shall hear everything."

"No, again!" said Packe. "I want to

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