

The Annexation Society

OR THE ADVENTURES OF JIMMIE TRICKETT.

BY J. S. FLETCHER.

THIS is one of the curiosity-cure stories. It has nothing to do with the war. The motif is straight mystery, such as usually calls for the expert talent of Raffles or Sherlock Holmes. The Tsar's Golden Cross disappears from the Royal apartments of one of the great English country seats, and to locate it taxes the ingenuity of both British and French experts in criminology. The crime in the case quite evidently does not emanate from the East End. The Golden Cross thief is not a Hooligan. Who is he? The discovery of the criminal throws considerable light on some aspects of British society under modern conditions. Not a single instalment of this story should be missed.

CHAPTER I.

The Tsar's Cross.

THE MARQUIS OF SCRAYE, opening his eyes that October morning on the familiar face and figure of his valet, who, following invariable custom, brought his master a homely pot of tea and a couple of digestive biscuits at precisely seven o'clock, was quick to observe that the man looked as all men look who have news to communicate, and he sat up immediately, knowing that something had happened.

"Well, what is it, Beevers?"

The valet coughed, glancing at the door.

"Mr. Viner, my lord—he would like to see your lordship as soon as possible," he answered. "He's—in fact, he's waiting outside, my lord."

The Marquis got slowly out of bed and into the dressing-gown which his man held in readiness.

"I suppose that means that something's gone wrong during the night," he muttered.

"Don't know, my lord," said Beevers. "I haven't heard of anything, my lord. But—"

"Well?" asked the Marquis.

"I thought Mr. Viner looked a bit upset, my lord," answered Beevers, quietly. He walked across to the windows, drew up the blinds, and turned to the door. "Shall I bring him in now, my lord?" he asked.

The Marquis thrust his feet into a pair of slippers, and picked up a biscuit as he nodded an affirmative to the valet's question: then he strolled across the room to satisfy himself as to the state of the weather. A moment later he turned from the contemplation of a fine morning to confront his house-steward, a big, solemn-visaged, middle-aged man, whose face, once across the threshold, showed unmistakable signs of anxiety and dismay. He gave a quick glance at the door as the valet closed it from the other side, and the least observant of observers might have safely laid a million to one that when he spoke it would be in a whisper.

"Well, Viner, what's the matter?" asked the Marquis, leisurely, pouring out a cup of tea. "House been on fire, or burglars paid us a visit, or what?"

The house-steward came close to his master, shaking his head. His cheeks and his voice quivered.

"My lord!—your lordship didn't remove anything out of the Queen's Chamber?—last night?" he asked agitatedly.

"Anything out of the Queen's Chamber?—last night?" exclaimed the Marquis. "No, I certainly didn't, Viner."

The house-steward groaned and wrung his plump hands.

"Then, my lord, I'm afraid—in fact, I'm sure, my lord—the Tsar's Cross has gone!" he said. "Gone, my lord—disappeared. The Tsar's Cross, my lord!"

The Marquis set down the cup which he was lifting to his lips. He stared at his house-steward as if that functionary had just informed him that the end of the world was certainly to come within the next hour.

"The Tsar's Cross!" he exclaimed. "The Tsar's—why, I saw it myself yesterday afternoon, Viner!"

Viner heaved a deep sigh and again shook his head.

"I saw it myself late last night, my lord," he answered dolefully. "So did Peters. You mayn't be aware of it, my lord, but Peters and I—we always take a look round the state chambers last thing. Everything was all right, my lord, at ten-thirty last night. But—the Tsar's Cross isn't there now."

The Marquis sipped his tea thoughtfully. Also he ate the rest of the biscuit which he had been crumbling when Viner entered.

"Burglars?" he said suddenly.

"I don't think so, my lord. Because," answered the house-steward, growing calmer under the influence of his master's imperturbability, "if it had been burglars, my lord, they'd have taken something else. Your lordship is aware of what a lot of valuables is kept in that cabinet in the Queen's Chamber. But there's nothing missing except the cross."

The Marquis nodded. He was thinking hard. He suddenly turned on the house-steward with a sharp inquiry.

"You haven't said anything of this to anyone, Viner?" he asked.

"Not a word, my lord—I came straight to your lordship," answered Viner. "I haven't even mentioned it to Peters—in fact, I haven't seen him this morning."

"That's right—don't speak of it to a soul," said the Marquis. "Now, come along—let me have a look at the cabinet."

HE motioned the house-steward to precede him; outside the room he beckoned to the valet who was waiting in the corridor.

"Beevers," he said, "don't mention to anyone—anyone!—that Mr. Viner has been to see me so early. You understand?"

"Perfectly, my lord," replied Beevers.

The Marquis and the house-steward went along the corridor in silence until they came to a door set deeply in the wall. Viner produced a key; the door, thrown open, revealed an ancient stone staircase, musty of odour and gloomy of aspect. The Marquis descended it, however, with the confidence of one well accustomed; at the foot of its twenty steps he pushed open a swing-door covered with faded tapestry and found himself in the ante-room of the famous state chambers wherein more than one of his ancestors had at various times housed kings and queens, ambassadors and princes. A magnificent suite of seventeenth-century apartments filling one side of the house and looking down on the Dutch garden for which Scraye was famous, the State Chambers were now in the catalogue of celebrated English show-places, and were to be seen on certain days of the week by anybody who was willing to contribute a shilling towards the charities of the neighbouring market-town. People came from near and far to wander through them, to admire the old furniture, the fading tapestry; the pictures, the bric-a-brac, the objects of vertu collected by the Marquises of Scraye since Tudor days—especially they came to see and wonder at the Queen's Chamber, wherein stood the bed, with its sheets and coverlets untouched, wherein Queen Elizabeth had once stretched her royal limbs, and from the pillows of which had probably cursed her serving-women.

Everything in that room remained exactly as it had been when the great Queen walked out of it; so everything was to remain until it dropped to pieces from sheer old age.

THE Marquis and his house-steward passed rapidly to this famous apartment, and without a glance at anything else went straight to a glass-fronted cabinet which was sunk in the panelled wall beside the great sculptured fireplace. This cabinet contained four shelves, lined with faded velvet; each shelf displayed curiosities of evident interest and value. In their time, the Marquises of Scraye had loomed large in the political and diplomatic worlds; several of them had been ambassadors at the principal foreign courts; this cupboard-cabinet, scantily, if at all, protected, contained gifts made to them by various monarchs and potentates. Here was a jewel-set reliquary of the 12th century, given to the sixth Marquis by Pope Clement the Fourteenth, there was a miniature of himself, set in diamonds, presented to the eighth Marquis by Louis Philippe, in acknowledgment of a kind service, delicately rendered. There were rings, intaglios, bracelets, carvings, small pictures, rare snuff-boxes, given to the family by kings, and emperors, and grand dukes, and electors—not in scant number, but in profusion. And there ought to have been and certainly was not, the magnificent diamond cross presented by the Tsar of all the Russias to the Marquis of Scraye, who figured with distinction in the diplomatic negotiations, which resulted in the Peace of Tilsit in 1814.

One glance at the cabinet satisfied the present holder of the historic title that his house-steward had spoken his fears correctly. He turned on his servant with a look of shocked surprise.

"It's certainly not there, Viner!" he exclaimed.

The house-steward's mournful countenance became still more lugubrious. "It is certainly not there now, my lord," he assented. "But it was there last night. It's been taken during the night, my lord. And—I'm sure it's not been by burglars."

The Marquis laid a hand on the glass-fronted door of the cupboard and pulled it open.

"Of course," he said, meditatively, "we've never kept this locked, Viner, have we?"

"Never, my lord," replied Viner, waxing more disconsolate. "If your lordship remembers, I've often said that this cabinet ought to have had a proper safety lock, long since."

"It was never locked," said the Marquis. "My father never had it locked. Besides, if burglars had wanted to have a go at it, Viner, no safety lock would have kept 'em out. Now, who on earth can have coveted that cross? I don't think it's been taken for its intrinsic value, you know, Viner, though it's certainly worth a few thousands for its gold and diamonds."

"Yes, my lord," assented Viner. "Your lordship thinks—?"

"I don't know what to think," said the Marquis. "You see—but then, of course, you know—the thing had such historic associations. No—there are more valuable things than the cross in here—intrinsically. That reliquary, for instance, is worth twice as much. I suppose you've had a look at the windows, Viner? It wouldn't be a difficult matter to get in here, you know, from the balcony."

The house-steward walked across to the range of high windows,

going from one to the other. The Marquis meanwhile put his head into the recessed cabinet, peering about from shelf to shelf. And suddenly he sniffed, as at some particular scent, and he started and drew back, glancing sharply at his servant's back.

"By Gad!" he muttered to himself. "By Gad!—very much by Gad!"

Viner came back across the room. "The windows are all right, my lord," he said. "As your lordship's aware, they're all fitted with patent catches. But of course, my lord, there are other ways of getting in."

"Yes—yes, of course," said the Marquis, dreamily. "Oh, lots of other ways, Viner! Well, to come back to plain facts, the thing's gone. The thing is, what's to be done now?"

Viner shook his head.

"The police, my lord?" he suggested.

But the marquis shook his head in his turn—decidedly and firmly.

"No," he answered. "I think not, Viner. At any rate, not just now. You haven't said a word of this to anybody?"

"Not to a soul, my lord!"

"Then don't. Don't breathe even a suspicion of it. There's no one knows you've come to me this morning?"

"Only Beevers, my lord."

"I'll make Beevers all right. I don't want anybody in the house to know of this—I shan't speak of it to anyone. Let's see—isn't this a visitors' day, Viner?"

"It is, my lord—from twelve to three-thirty."

"All right. Let things go on as usual. By the by, does anyone point out the particular objects in this room to visitors?"

"No, my lord, not now. We used to, my lord, but there are so many parties come now-a-days that we just let them walk round and see things for themselves. Keeping an eye on them, of course, my lord."

"Very good," said the Marquis. "Now, then, come back with me to my room; I've already thought of what I'll do."

Once more in his bed-room the Marquis sat down at his writing-table and picked up a railway guide. Having consulted this he drew a block of telegram forms to him and began to write.

"I want you to send this wire off yourself, Viner," he said. "Tell one of the men to drive you down to the village with it; I don't want anybody in the house to see it—but yourself. Let me see, now—yes, that will do."

Laying down his pen the Marquis murmured over what he had written.

"To Nicholson Packe, Esq.,
123a, Charles Street, London, S.W."

"Can you meet me this afternoon at two o'clock sharp at the Salutation Hotel, Brychester? I want to see you on a very important and interesting matter. Scraye."

"That will do," the Marquis repeated, handing the telegram to his house-steward. "Don't forget, Viner, send it off yourself. And then—not a word, not a sign! There is more in this affair, Viner, than you yet dream of."

CHAPTER II.

Mysteries.

ABOUT half-past nine that morning—a fine, bright morning in London—there swung out of the Haymarket into Charles Street a smart automobile driven by a young gentleman who piloted it with the greatest nicety and precision to the door of Number 123a, dismounted, divested himself of a remarkably thick blanket coat, and with a mere word to the liveried youth who had sat at his side, went into the house and leisurely mounted to the first floor, where he presently paused at a door whereon was fixed a small, highly-polished brass plate, on which was incised the name, "Mr. Uicholson Packe." He had no sooner pressed the button of the electric bell which appeared above this plate than the door opened and revealed a neat and obsequious manservant, who bowed as the visitor entered and seemed to indicate that it was a pleasure to see him.

"Morning, Hollis," said the young gentleman, in an airy, nonchalant fashion which thoroughly accorded