

The Annexation Society

(Continued from page 14.)

tween here and Paris. No, that hamper," she continued, gazing at the article in question with a meditative air, "that hamper has travelled with me between London and Paris and Paris and London I don't know how many times."

"Bless us!" exclaimed Jimmy, gazing at the hamper with suddenly awakened interest. "You don't say so! Why?"

"Ah!" said Miss Walsden. "Now you're inquisitive. I'll bet you a pair of gloves that you can't guess in three times what that hamper's got in it?"

"Done!" said Jimmie. "A cat."

Miss Walsden shook her head.

"That's a poor guess," she said. "You'd have heard a cat before now."

"Flowers," suggested Jimmie.

"Wrong," replied Miss Walsden. "Very much wrong."

Jimmie took a long look at the hamper. It suggested nothing to him but memories of various picnics in which he had taken part.

"Hothouse grapes," he said. "Eh?"

"Well, that's something like it," admitted Miss Walsden, "for it's certainly something to eat. But you'd never guess, so I'll tell you. It's a Michaelmas goose!"

"A Michaelmas goose!" exclaimed Jimmie. "Good Lord!—what are you carrying a Michaelmas goose to Paris for?"

"I thought that would interest you," said Miss Walsden. "It is a present—a peculiarly English, eminently seasonable, present as you'll admit. You see, Madame Charles has in Paris a brother-in-law, Monsieur Charles, who is perhaps, not very well off, and is—no, perhaps, but certainly—an epicure. Monsieur Charles has a love of our good English fare—so whenever she herself comes to Paris, or I come, she brings with her, or sends with me, some peculiarly English present for this brother-in-law. It varies with the season. Sometimes it is Whitstable oysters. Sometimes a brace of partridges or a couple of pheasants. Sometimes early asparagus—sometimes real Kentish strawberries when they are worth their weight at any rate, in silver. I have brought Monsieur Charles a saddle of the finest Welsh mutton. I have brought him a ripe Stilton cheese. When he calls at the Rue de la Paix to-morrow morning I shall present him with this beautiful Michaelmas goose—a fat one!"

She laughed merrily, and Jimmie Trickett became enchanted.

"I say!" he said. "That makes me positively hungry—I'm looking forward to my dinner. I say! Come and dine with me. I know—do you know it?—the jolliest little restaurant at the end of the Rue Royale—we'll go there. What?"

Miss Walsden considered matters.

"It sounds tempting," she said. "Very well, thank you. But I must be at the Rue de la Paix at ten o'clock, punctually."

After that it seemed only natural that his companion should allow Jimmie to take all her affairs into his hands. She permitted him to see to her belongings at the Gare du Nord; she accepted his assurance that she would find them all in safe order at the Rue de la Paix when she arrived there. And Jimmie, having given his instructions and distributed his tips to obsequious porters, drove her off triumphantly to the Rue Royale.

It was midnight when Jimmie, highly content with his day's work, entered his room at the Grand Hotel. And there, perched on the top of his suitcase, he saw the wickerwork hamper which contained the unknown Monsieur Charles's fat Michaelmas goose.

CHAPTER IX.

The Wickerwork Hamper.

TRICKETT'S first instinct, on seeing this extraordinary addition to his personal belongings, was to curse the porter whose stupidity had caused the mistake. He had not only given him five francs for his trouble, but the fullest and most minute instructions as to the disposal of the articles committed to his charge. These things—

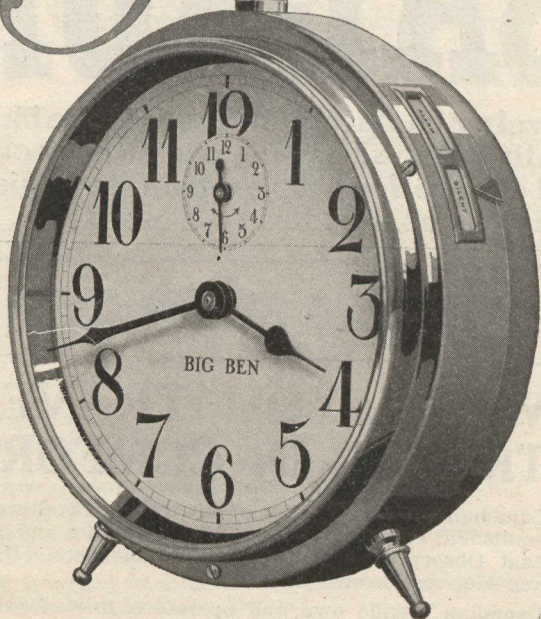
duly specified and properly labelled—in one conveyance to Mademoiselle's address in the Rue de la Paix; these others, also labelled and pointed out, to Monsieur's room at the Grand Hotel. Nothing could be plainer—the porter had comprehended perfectly. And yet here was the wickerwork hamper in company with Jimmie's suitcase and dressing-case and small hand-bag, and at that moment Miss Walsden was doubtless bewailing its absence in her chamber at the establishment of Valerie et Cie. However, when Jimmie looked more closely at the hamper, he saw that it was not labelled in any way whatever. He accordingly forgave the porter and burst into laughter.

"First time I ever shared sleeping quarters with a Michaelmas, or any other sort of goose!" he murmured. "Good job it's a dead 'un."

The humour of the situation began to attract Jimmie. He possessed a sense of inquisitiveness which, if not exactly insatiable, was at any rate ardent. And the more he looked at the wickerwork hamper, and the more he reflected on the oddity of the situation, the more his curiosity was aroused. He lifted the hamper across to an unoccupied table and looked speculatively at it, reflecting on what Miss Walsden told him of its many journeys. It seemed an odd thing to him that anybody should take the trouble to send a fat goose across the Channel, even at Michaelmas. Jimmie knew enough of France, having frequently taken long motor journeys through it, to be aware that in certain districts geese are as carefully fattened as in England. What particular charm was there, he wondered, about an English goose? This decided him. He would have a look at the present forwarded by Madame Charles to the epicure brother-in-law.

THE wicker-work hamper was not locked. It was a smart, well-made hamper, not the sort of thing that can be bought for a shilling or two, but a rather pretentious article, solidly fashioned, well-finished, and fitted with nickel-plated strap-handles, the sort of thing indeed which serves, when properly fitted up, as an up-the-river lunch basket, being about twenty inches in length, twelve in width, and as many in depth. It would not have surprised Jimmie, who possessed two or three articles of the same sort to find, when he had unbuckled the straps and lifted the lid, that it was fitted with knives, forks, plates, and drinking vessels. But when he raised the lid, he saw nothing but carefully disposed folds of tissue paper, on removing which the goose became revealed, enveloped in a dainty cloth, and resting on more tissue paper. It was actually a fine goose, and Jimmie was considerate enough to reflect that it would certainly have been a pity if Monsieur Charles had been denied the opportunity of sticking knife and fork into it. However, he further reflected, it should be duly handed over to Miss Walsden early next morning. It was safe enough until then, and it was lucky that, unaddressed as it was, the hamper had fallen into his hands instead of being left and lost at the Gare du Nord. But as this comforting notion slipped into his mind, another, of a disquieting nature, followed sharply on its heels. Would the goose keep? Jimmie had no notion of house-keeping matters, but it was borne in upon his mind that he had somewhere heard that all fleshly comestibles should be kept on stone shelves or tables in properly appointed larders. Coolness, coolness, that was the thing. Why, else, did the butcher and poulterer fellows advertise on their shop fronts (Jimmie was a great reader of anything that appeared in shop windows, being a confirmed street lounge) that they kept cold rooms in their establishments? Being fond of comfort he had caused a fire to be lighted in his bedroom. Its warmth, he thought, might be bad for the goose, in which he was by that time taking a profound interest. What,

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