

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 Brychester Station. Packe takes with him his clever friend Jimmie Trickett, whose adventures form a considerable part of the story to follow. Scraye suspects Mrs. X., one of his guests. He tells Packe his suspicions and the reasons why, and asks him to shadow Mrs. X's movements in London. Packe invites Trickett into the plot. The two of them shadow Mrs. X in London. Trickett lands in a millinery shop—one of Mrs. X's haunts—and decides suddenly to go to Paris.

CHAPTER VII.

Councils of War.

AT six o'clock that evening, Jimmie Trickett, idling away the time between his afternoon cup of tea and his hour of dressing for dinner over a French novel and a cigarette, was summoned by Kentover to the telephone.

"Mr. Packe, sir," said Kentover.

Jimmie took up the receiver.

"That you, Packe?" he asked.

"Jimmie," answered Packe. "Come along at once to the Ritz—Scraye and I want to see you just now."

"I'm not dressed," growled Jimmie.

"Hang your dressing; no time for that to-night. Come as you are," commanded Packe. "But come—now! Something important!"

Jimmie made a further growl which the listener might take as an assent. He looked down at himself as he turned away from the telephone. He had exchanged his afternoon grandeur for a tweed lounge suit, and being a very conventional young person who liked to live in decency and order, it went against his principles to go out to dinner save in proper regulation attire. But Packe's tone had been insistent.

"Oh, well, suppose I must," said Jimmie, with a yawn. "Get me an overcoat, Kentover, and blow down for a taxi-cab. I mayn't be in until late this evening, so don't forget that I must breakfast early to-morrow morning—eight, at the latest."

A quarter of an hour later, Jimmie walked into Lord Scraye's private sitting-room at the Ritz Hotel, and found its occupant in close conversation over the fire with Packe. Scraye wheeled a chair into position between them.

"Good of you to come at once, Trickett," he said. "Packe and I are having a council of war and we want your aid. The fact is, there have been developments."

Jimmie dropped into a chair and took the cigarette which Scraye offered him.

"Since our adventure of this morning?" he asked.

"The development has happened to me," replied Scraye. "From what Packe tells me your adventures of this morning didn't amount to much."

"Then Packe draws inferences which I haven't drawn," remarked Jimmie. "I think our adventures of this morning amounted to a good deal."

Packe glanced at Scraye.

"Before you tell Jimmie what you've just told me, Scraye," he said, "I should like to know what Jimmie really does think about what we did this morning. For my part, I think we did no more than follow Mrs. Wythenshawe from Victoria Station to

a post-office in Regent Street, from the post-office to a fashionable hat-shop in South Molton Street, and from the hat-shop to her own house in Wilton Crescent. I confess I see nothing more than that in all we did."

Scraye, with a motion of his right eyelid, drew Jimmie's attention to a decanter of sherry which stood on a small table at his elbow; Jimmie poured out a half glassful and sipped the wine thoughtfully.

"Yes," he said. "I daresay that's all you would see, Packe. Being an inventor of mysteries you won't see plain facts when they're under your very nose. Now, I'm not an inventor nor a creator; I'm a practical sort of chap. We're taking it for granted that Mrs. Wythenshawe appropriated the Tsar's Cross from the Queen's Chamber at Scraye during the night before last, aren't we? Very well; shall I tell you what she did with it?"

Packe laughed; Scraye stopped him with an eager gesture.

"Do!" he said, turning to Jimmie.

"Tell us!"

"Right!" continued Jimmie. "And I guess I'm absolutely right, though I couldn't for the life of me tell you why I'm right. Mrs. Wythenshawe, once possessed of your cross, made it into a neat parcel. She took it to Brychester with her when she accompanied Colonel and Mrs. Durham to see the antiquities of that famous city. She went into Brychester post-office and despatched the parcel to herself, registered, to be called for at the post-office in Regent Street—Upper Regent Street, to be exact. This morning she called at that post-office for it—I saw her bring it out; I noticed, being uncommonly sharp-eyed, that it was registered. She carried that parcel in her hand when she went into the hat-shop. And—she left it there."

"Left it there?" exclaimed both listeners.

"She left it there," repeated Jimmie with great solemnity. "You see, Packe, I did the detective business while you did the ornamental—or shall we say the covering?—work. I have a knack, as I think I said before, of noticing little things. Now, when Mrs. Wythenshawe got into her taxi-cab at Victoria she was carrying one of these enormous muffs which women lug about now-a-days, you know—things you could put a side of bacon into. When she went into the post-office she left her muff in the cab; when she went into the hat-shop she left her muff in the cab again. Consequently her hands were free, and also were open to observation. I observed 'em. She brought the parcel out of the post-office in her left hand—she carried it into the hat-shop in her right hand. When she came out of the hat-shop it wasn't in either hand. To prove my powers of observation to you both, I will merely remark that though I never saw Mrs. Wythenshawe in my life before, she is a lady who uses her hands freely in conversation—gesticulates a good deal."

"That's quite true," observed Scraye.

"VERY good," said Jimmie. "Mrs. Wythenshawe came out of the hat-shop attended by one of the hat-shop's young ladies. Mrs. Wythenshawe talked for a moment with great vivacity before getting into her cab. She used her hands freely. And there wasn't that parcel in either of them. Therefore, I conclude that Mrs. Wythenshawe left the parcel in the hat-shop, or sent it away from the hat-shop. Into the hat-shop she carried it—out of the hat-shop she did not carry it!"

"Ingenious—ingenious!" murmured Packe. "Very ingenious, Jimmie. I

only hope it's true."

"I'm inclined to think that Trickett's theory is true," observed Scraye. "It fits in with what I've learned this afternoon—at least, I can imagine how it may fit in. You see, Trickett, I have heard since I arrived in town at three o'clock of two more thefts of a similar nature to that of which we're aware."

"Two more!" exclaimed Jimmie.

"Two more—in which Mrs. Wythenshawe could not possibly be concerned," replied Scraye. "Listen to what I can tell you about them. When I came up this afternoon, I went to the Antediluvian Club. There I saw Lord Palsgrave and Sir Simon Fleming talking very gravely in a corner of the smoking-room. After a time Palsgrave came over and asked me to join them. Having got me to themselves they asked me with an air of great mystery and secrecy if I was not at Mr. Godenham's when his famous jewelled chalice was stolen? I replied that I was. They asked me to tell them what I remembered of the circumstances. I told them. Then they told me that during the past week Palsgrave had lost a certain illuminated missal, once the property of Henry the Eighth, and Fleming a gold chain which was reputed to have been given to an ancestor of his by Lady Jane Grey the night before her execution."

"Always historical curiosities," muttered Trickett.

"QUITE so—always things that collectors are hunting after," assented Scraye. "Well, as they'd told me so much, I told them my story. But I carefully refrained from telling them that I suspected Mrs. Wythenshawe. For the present we'll keep that to ourselves. Then the three of us carefully went into matters. We discovered that each robbery was effected under similar circumstances—the objects were displayed in some show-room of each house and not particularly guarded—they were all easily accessible. We proceeded to discuss our servants. Not one of the three could think of a servant in his employ of whose honesty he had not a perfectly high opinion. Then we discussed our guests—for in each case the theft had been made while the owner of the thing stolen was entertaining a house-party. All the people at Palsgrave's place were well known in society; so were the guests at Fleming's. I mentioned the names of my visitors; Palsgrave and Fleming agreed that they were all above suspicion. So you see, there's one thing certain."

"What?" asked Trickett.

"That more than one person is concerned in these thefts," answered Scraye. "I am absolutely satisfied that Mrs. Wythenshawe has stolen my cross. But—there are others who are at the same game. And the big question is—what does it all mean?"

"And if Jimmie's theory is right," said Packe, "what has the hat-shop got to do with it?"

Trickett made no immediate reply. He had his own thoughts and his own ideas; he had also his own plans. He was not going to tell Scraye nor Packe, either, of his proposed trip to Paris—that, he considered, was his own concern. But he was already wondering if that further acquaintance with Madame Charles' pretty assistant upon which he was resolutely determined, might not enable him to find out more about this mystery. And when he gave answer to Packe's question it was with deliberate evasion.

"The hat-shop may have nothing to

do with it or a good deal to do with it," he said. "All I know is that Mrs. Wythenshawe carried into the hat-shop the parcel which she got at the post-office, and didn't bring it out again. And it may be that she sent it away from there; what would be easier than that she could call in at one of her tradeswomen's in order to re-address the parcel? For you can bet your last shilling that if that parcel contained the cross she wouldn't keep it about her. For all these things that have been stolen—all these historical curiosities and so on—there is a destination. A destination! Somebody wants 'em. That's flat."

"Yes," said Scraye, meditatively. "Yes, that's the right word. A destination. That's it, of course. They go somewhere."

"But where?" asked Packe.

"A more businesslike question," said Trickett, "is—what are you going to do to find out where they go? Have you got any scheme?" he continued, turning to Scraye. "You, at any rate, are certain as to your particular thief, even if she's only one of a gang. What are you going to do?"

"I have a scheme," answered Scraye. "I formulated it after hearing what I did from Palsgrave and Fleming. I put it before them; we talked it over. Now I'll tell it to you two. It's this, to make a sort of defence league amongst the owners of these things. We all belong to a certain stratum of society—by quiet, confidential talk we can warn each other. The next time anything disappears—well, the despoiled owner must strike sharp and straight."

"Supposing you had struck sharp and straight yesterday morning?" suggested Trickett. "What would have happened? A tremendous scandal—and possibly you wouldn't have been able to convict the suspected person. If this thing is being done on a big secret scale, you can be certain that all the arrangements are clever to perfection. The particular article once gone, it will be hard work to trace it."

"How shall we bring detection about, then?" asked Scraye.

Jimmie swallowed the rest of his sherry and smiled.

"In Packe's six-shilling sensationalisms," he said slyly, "detection generally comes by accident—by sheer chance—sheer luck in this case—may be close at hand. And it mayn't."

CHAPTER VIII.

The Day Mail to Paris.

FROM his father, an astute North-country chemist who, having invented a patent medicine, had speedily realized that the only way to make a fortune out of it was by plausible and persistent advertising, and had reaped in ample fashion the reward of his foresight, Jimmie Trickett had inherited something more than an income of twenty thousand pounds a year. The paternal Trickett had dowered his son with the faculty of keeping his own counsel in matters which concerned himself, and with the trick of using a shrewd intelligence in conducting his various daily happenings. Consequently Jimmie, whose sole reason for going over to Paris lay in a desire to further cultivate the acquaintance of the hat-maker's pretty assistant, used considerable diplomacy in placing himself once more within her notice. Rash and hot-headed young men would have gone to the length of getting into the same compartment with her at the point of departure; Jimmie took care to do nothing of the sort, though he satisfied himself that she was on the train. He kept the tail of an eye on her at Dover, but he let the boat get half way across to Calais before he approached her. And when he at last drew near to Miss Walsden it was in the most natural fashion imaginable, and as if he had suddenly found good reason for doing so.

This was a fine, bright, spirits-enlivening morning, and few of the people on the Dover-Calais boat seemed inclined to spend the hour of crossing downstairs. Jimmie Trickett, keeping a keen observation on the object of his intentions, watched her until well