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JENNIE BAXTER: JOURNALIST

BY ROBERT BARR.

III.—The Duchess of Chiselhurst's Ball.

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The room which had been allotted to Jennie Baxter in the Schloss Steinheimer enjoyed a most extended outlook. A door window gave access to a stone balcony, which hung against the castle wall like a swallow's nest at the eaves of a house. This balcony was just wide enough to give ample space for one of the easy rocking chairs which the princess had imported from America and which Jennie thought were the only really comfortable pieces of furniture the old stronghold possessed, much as she admired the artistic excellence of the mediæval chairs, tables and cabinets which for centuries had served the needs of the ancient line that had lived in the schloss. The chair was as modern as this morning's daily paper, its woodwork painted a bright scarlet, its arms like broad shelves, its rockers as sensitively balanced as a marine compass—in fact, just such a chair as one would find dotted round the vast veranda of an American summer hotel. In this chair sat Miss Jennie, two open letters on her lap and perplexity in the dainty little frown that faintly ruffled the smoothness of her fair brow. The scene from the high balcony was one to be remembered; but, although this was her last day at the castle, the girl saw nothing of the pretty town of Meran so far below, the distant chalk line down the slope beyond which marked the turbulent course of the foaming Adige, the lofty mountains all around or the farther snow peaks, dazzlingly white against the deep blue of the sky.

One of the epistles which lay on her lap was the letter she had received from the editor recounting the difficulties he had met with while endeavoring to make arrangements for reporting adequately the Duchess of Chiselhurst's ball; the other was the still unanswered invitation from the duchess to the princess. Jennie was flattered to know that already the editor, who had engaged her with unconcealed reluctance, now expected her to accomplish what the entire staff was powerless to effect. She knew that, had she but the courage, it was only necessary to accept the invitation in the name of her present hostess and attend the great society function as Princess von Steinheimer. Yet she hesitated, not so much on account of the manifest danger of discovery, but because she had grown to like the princess, and this impersonation, if it came to the knowledge of the one most intimately concerned, as it was almost sure to do, would doubtless be regarded as an unpardonable liberty. As she swayed gently back and forth in the gaudy rocking chair she thought of confessing everything to the princess and asking her assistance; but, pondering on this, she saw that it was staking everything on one throw of the dice. If the princess refused, then the scheme became impossible, as that lady herself would answer the letter and decline the invitation. Jennie soothed her accusing conscience by telling herself that this impersonation would do no harm to Princess von Steinheimer or to any one else, for that matter, while it would be of inestimable assistance to her own journalistic career. From that she drifted to meditation on the inequalities of this life, the superabundance which some possess, while others, no less deserving, have difficulty in obtaining the scant necessities. And, this consoling train of thought having fixed her resolve to take the goods the gods scattered at her feet, or rather threw into her lap, she drew a long sigh of determination as there came a gentle tap at the door of her room and the voice of the princess herself said, "May I come in?"

Jennie, a rapid blush flaming her cheeks, sprang to her feet, flung the letters on a table and opened the door. The visitor entered, looking charming enough to be a princess of fairyland, and greeted Miss Baxter most cordially. "I am so sorry you are leaving," she said. "Cannot you be persuaded to change your mind and stay with me? Where could you find a more lovely view than that from your balcony here?"

"Or a more lovely hostess?" said the girl, looking at her visitor with undisguised admiration and quite ignoring the view.

The princess laughed, and as they now stood together on the balcony she put out her hands, pushed Jennie gently into the rocking chair again, seating herself jauntily on its broad arm, and thus the two looked like a pair of mischievous schoolgirls, home at vacation, thoroughly enjoying their liberty.

"There! Now you are my prisoner, about to be punished for flattery," cried the princess. "I saw by the motion of the chair that you had just jumped up from it when I disturbed you, so there you are back in it again. What were you thinking about? A rocking chair lends itself deliciously to meditation, and we always think of some one very particular as we rock."

"I am no exception to the rule," sighed Jennie. "I was thinking of you, princess."

"How nice of you to say that, and, as one good turn deserves another, here is proof that a certain young lady has been in my thoughts."

As she spoke the princess took from her pocket an embossed case of Russia leather, opened it and displayed a string of diamonds lustrous as drops of liquid light.

"I want you to wear these stones in remembrance of our diamond mystery; also I confess that I want you to think of me every time you put them on. See how conceited I am! One does not like

to be forgotten; that is why I chose diamonds."

Jennie took the string, her own eyes for a moment rivaling in brilliancy the sparkle of the gems; then the moisture obscured her vision, and she automatically poured the stones from one hand to the other, as if their scintillating glitter hypnotized her. She tried once or twice to speak, but could not be sure of her voice, so remained silent. The princess, noticing her agitation, gently lifted the necklace and clasped it round the girl's white throat, chattering all the while with nervous haste.

"There! You can wear diamonds, and there are so many to whom they are unbecoming. I also look well in diamonds; at least so I've been told over and over again, and I've come to believe it at last. I suppose the young men have not concealed from you the fact that you are a strikingly good looking girl, Jennie. Indeed, and this is a brag, if you like, we two resemble one another enough to be sisters, nearly the same height, the same color of eyes and hair. Come to the mirror, Miss Handsomeness, and admire yourself."

She dragged Jennie to her feet and drew her into the room, placing her triumphantly before the great looking glass that reflected back a full length portrait.

"Now confess that you never saw a prettier girl," cried the princess gleefully.

"I don't think I ever did," admitted Jennie, but she was looking at the image of the princess and not at her own. The princess laughed, but Miss Baxter seemed too much affected by the unexpected present to join in the merriment. She regarded herself solemnly in the glass for a few moments, then slowly undid the clasp, and slipping the string of brilliants from her neck, handed them back to the princess.

"You are very, very kind, but I cannot accept so costly a present."

"Cannot? Why? Have I offended you by anything I have said since you came?"

"Oh, no, no! It isn't that."

"What, then? Don't you like me, after all?"

"Like you? I love you, princess!" cried the girl impulsively, throwing her arms round the other's neck.

The princess tried to laugh as she pressed Jennie closely to her, but there was a tremor of tears in the laughter.

"You must take this little gift as a souvenir of your visit with me. I was really—very unhappy when you came, and now—well, you smoothed away some misunderstandings. I'm very grateful. And it isn't natural for a woman to refuse diamonds, Jennie."

"I know it isn't, and I won't quite refuse them. I'll postpone. It is possible that something I shall do before long may seriously offend you. If it does, then goodbye to the necklace! If it doesn't, when I have told you all about my misdeed—I shall confess courageously—you will give me the diamonds."

"Dear me, Jennie, what terrible crime are you about to commit? Why not tell me now? You have no idea how you have aroused my curiosity."

"I dare not tell you, princess, not until my project proves a success or a failure. We women—some have our way made for us; others have our own way to make. I am among the others, and I hope you will remember that, if you are ever angry with me."

"Is it a new kind of speculation, a fortune made in a day, gambling?"

"Something of that sort. I am going to stake a good deal on the turn of a card; so please pray that luck will not be against me."

"If pluck will make you win, I am sure that you will carry it through, but if at first you don't succeed, try, try again, and if you haven't the money I'll supply the capital. I know I should like to gamble. Anyhow, you have my best wishes for your success."

"Thank you, princess. I can hardly fail after that."

The time had come when the two friends must part. The carriage was waiting to take Miss Baxter to the sta-



Jennie set about the construction of a ball dress.

tion, and the girl bade goodbye to her hostess with a horrible feeling that she was acting disloyally by one who had befriended her. In her hand bag was the invitation to the ball, and also the letter she had written in the princess's name, accepting it, which latter she posted in Meran. In due course she reached London and presented herself to the editor of The Daily Bugle.

"Well, Miss Baxter," he said, "you have been extraordinarily successful in solving the diamond mystery, and I congratulate you. My letter reached you, I suppose. Have you given any thought to the problem that now confronts me? Can you get us a full report of the Duchess of Chiselhurst's ball, written so convincingly that all the guests who

read it will know that the writer was present?"

"It is all a question of money, Mr. Hardwick."

"Most things are. Well, we are prepared to spend money to get just what we want."

"How much?"

"Whatever is necessary."

"That's vague. Put it into figures."

"Five hundred pounds, £700, £1,000 if need be."

"It will not cost you £1,000, and it may come to more than £500. Place £1,000 to my credit, and I shall return what is left. I must go at once to Paris and carry out my plans from that city."

"Then you have thought out a scheme? What is it?"

"I have not only thought it out, but most of the arrangements are already made. I cannot say more about it. You will have to trust entirely to me."

"There is a good deal of money at stake, Miss Baxter, and our reputation as a newspaper as well. I think I should know what you propose to do."

"Certainly. I propose to obtain for you an accurate description of the ball written by one who was present."

The editor gave utterance to a sort of interjection that always served him in place of a laugh.

"In other words, you want neither interference nor advice."

"Exactly. Mr. Hardwick. You know from experience that little good comes of talking too much of a secret project not yet completed."

The editor drummed with his fingers on the table for a few moments thoughtfully.

"Very well, then; it shall be as you say. I should have been very glad to share the responsibility of failure with you, but if you prefer to take the whole risk yourself there is nothing more to be said. The thousand pounds shall be placed to your credit at once. What next?"

"On the night of the ball I should like you to have three or four expert shorthand writers here. I don't know how many will be necessary. You understand more about that than I do. But it is my intention to dictate the report right along as fast as I can talk until it is finished, and I don't wish to be stopped or interrupted; so I want the best stenographers you have. They are to relieve one another just as if they were taking down a parliamentary speech. The men had better be in readiness at midnight. I shall be here as soon after that as possible. If you will kindly run over their typewritten manuscript before it goes to the compositor, I will glance at the proofs when I have finished dictating."

"Then you hope to attend the ball yourself?"

"Perhaps."

"You have just returned from the Tyrol, and I fear you don't quite appreciate the difficulties that are in the way. This is no ordinary society function, and if you think even £1,000 will gain admittance to an uninvited guest you will find yourself mistaken."

"So I understood from your letter."

Again the editorial interjection did duty for a laugh.

"You are very sanguine, Miss Baxter. I wish I felt as confident. However, we will hope for the best and, if we cannot command success we will at least endeavor to deserve it."

Jennie, with the £1,000 at her disposal, went to Paris, took rooms at the most aristocratic hotel, engaged a maid and set about the construction of a ball dress that would be a dream of beauty. Luckily, she knew exactly the gown making resources of Paris, and the craftsmen to whom she gave her orders were not the less anxious to please her when they knew that the question of cost was not to be considered. From Paris she telegraphed in the name of the Princess von Steinheimer to Claridge's hotel for an apartment on the night of the ball and asked that a suitable equipage be provided to convey her to and from that festival.

Arriving at Claridge's, she was aware that her first danger was that some one who knew the Princess von Steinheimer would call upon her, but on the valid plea of fatigue from her journey she proclaimed that under no circumstances could she see any visitor, and thus shipwreck was avoided at the outset. It was unlikely that the Princess von Steinheimer was personally known to many who would attend the ball—in fact, the princess had given to Jennie as her main reason for refusing the invitation the excuse that she knew no one in London. She had been invited merely because of the social position of the prince in Vienna and was unknown by sight even to her hostess, the Duchess of Chiselhurst.

It is said that a woman, magnificently robed is superior to all earthly tribulations. Such was the case with Jennie as she left her carriage, walked along the strip of carpet which lay across the pavement under a canopy and entered the great hall of the Duke of Chiselhurst's town house, one of the huge palaces of western London. Nothing so resplendent had she ever witnessed or even imagined as the scene which met her eye when she found herself about to ascend the broad stairway, at the top of which the hostess stood to receive her distinguished guests. Early as she was, the stairway and the rooms beyond seemed already thronged. Splendid menials in gorgeous livery, crimson the predominant color stood on each step at either side of the stair. Uniforms of every pattern from the gorgeous oriental treatment of Indian princes and eastern potentates to the more sober but scarcely less rich apparel of the diplomatic corps, ministers of the empire and officers, naval and military, gave the final note of magnificent and picturesque decoration. Like tropical flowers in this garden of color were the ladies, who, with easy grace, moved to and fro, bestowing a smile here and a whisper there, and yet, despite her agitation, a hurried, furtive glance around brought to Jennie the conviction that she was perhaps the best

gowned woman among that assemblage of well dressed people, which recognition somewhat calmed her palpitating heart. The whole environment seemed unreal to her, and she walked forward as if in a dream. She heard some one cry, "The Princess von Steinheimer!" and at first had difficulty in realizing that the title, for the moment, pertained to herself. The next instant her hand was in that of the Duchess of Chiselhurst, and Jennie heard the lady murmur that it was good of her to come so far to grace the occasion. The girl made some sort of reply which she found herself unable afterward to recall, but the rapid incoming of other guests led her to hope that if she had used any unsuitable phrase it was either unheard or forgotten in the tension of the time. She stood aside and formed one of the brilliant group at the head of the stairs, thankful that this first ordeal was well done with.

Her rapidly beating heart had now opportunity to lessen its pulsations, and as she soon found that she was practically unnoticed her natural calmness began to return to her. She remembered why she was there, and her discerning eye enabled her to stamp on a retentive



There was no recognition in the large frightened eyes.

memory the various particulars of so unaccustomed a spectacle, whose very unfamiliarity made the greater impression on the girl's mind. She moved away from the group, determined to saunter through the numerous rooms thrown open for the occasion, and thus, as it were, get her bearings. In a short time all fear of discovery left her, and she began to feel very much at home in the lofty, crowded salons, pausing even to enjoy a selection which a military band, partly concealed in the foliage, was rendering in a masterly manner, led by the most famous impresario of the day. The remote probability of meeting any one here who knew the princess reassured her, and there speedily came over her a sense of delight in all the kaleidoscopic dazzle of this great entertainment. She saw that each one there had interest in some one else, and, to her great relief, found herself left entirely alone, with reasonable assurance that this remoteness would continue to befriender her until the final gantlet of leave taking had to be run—a trial still to be encountered, the thought of which she resolutely put away from her, trusting to the luck that had hitherto not deserted her.

Jennie was in this complaisant frame of mind when she was suddenly startled by a voice at her side.

"Ah, princess, I have been searching everywhere for you, catching glimpses of you now and then, only to lose you, as, alas, has been my fate on a more serious occasion! May I flatter myself with the belief that you also remember?"

There was no recognition in the large frightened eyes that were turned upon him. They saw a young man bowing low over the unresisting hand he had taken. His face was clear cut and unmistakably English. Jennie saw his closely cropped auburn head, and, as it raised until it overtopped her own, the girl, terrified as she was, could not but admire the sweeping blond mustache that overshadowed a smile, half wistful, half humorous, that lighted up his handsome face. The ribbon of some order was worn athwart his breast; otherwise he wore court dress, which well became his stalwart frame.

"I am disconsolate to see that I am indeed forgotten, princess, and so another cherished delusion fades away from me."

Her fan concealed the lower part of the girl's face, and she looked at him over its fleecy semicircle.

"Put not your trust in princesses," she murmured, a sparkle of latent mischief lighting up her eyes.

The young man laughed. "Indeed," he said, "had I served my country as faithfully as I have been true to my remembrance of you, princess, I would have been an ambassador long ere this, covered with decorations. Have you, then, lost all recollection of that winter in Washington five years ago, that whirlwind of gaiety which ended by wafting you away to a foreign country, so that the eventual season clings to my memory as if it were a disastrous western cyclone? Is it possible that I must reintroduce myself as Donal Stirling?"

"Not Lord Donal Stirling?" asked Jennie, dimly remembering that she had heard this name in connection with something diplomatic, and her guess that he was in that service was strengthened by his previous remark about being an ambassador.

"Yes, Lord Donal, if you will cruelly insist on calling me so, but this cannot take from me the consolation that once, in the conservatory of the White House, under the very shadow of the president, you condescended to call me Don."