JENNIE BAXTER: JOURNALIST

BY ROBERT BARR.

VII.—The Wizard In His Magic Attic.

Then, to the consternation of Jennie, who had already risen in terror from her chair, the old man plunged forward on his face. Jennie had difficulty in repressing a shriek. She looked round hurriedly for a bell to ring, but there evidently was none. She tried to open the door and cry for help, but in her excitement could find neither handle nor latch. It seemed to be locked, and the key, doubtless, was in the professor's pocket. She thought at first that he had dropped dead, but the continuing moans as he lay on the floor convinced her of her error. She bent over him anxiously and cried, "What can I do to help you?"

With a struggle he muttered, "The bottle—the bottle—in the cupboard behind you."

She hurriedly flung open the doors of the cupboard indicated and found a bottle of brandy and a glass, which she partly filled. The old man had with an effort struggled into a sitting posture, and she held the glass of fiery liquid to his pallid lips. He gulped down the brandy and gasped: "I feel better now. Help me to my chair."

Assisting him to his feet, she supported him to his armchair, when he shook himself free, crying angrily: "Let me alone! Don't you see I am all right again?"

The girl stood aside, and the professor dropped into his chair, his nervous hands vibrating on his knees. For a long interval nothing was said by either, and the girl at last seated herself in the chair she had formerly occupied. The first words the old man spoke were, "Who sent you here?"

"No one. I came of my own accord. I wished to meet some one who had a large knowledge of explosives, and Herr Feltz, the chemist, gave me your address."

"Herr Feltz! Herr Feltz!" he repeated. "So he sent you here?"

"No one sent me here," insisted the girl. "It is as I tell you. Herr Feltz merely gave me your address."

"Where did you get that powdered gold?"

"It came from the debris of an explosion."

"I know; you said that before. Where was the explosion? Who caused it?"

"That I don't know."

"Don't you know where the explosion was?"

"Yes, I know where the explosion was, but I don't know who caused it."

"Who sent you here?"

"I tell you no one sent me here."

"That is not true. The man who caused the explosion sent you here. You

He staggered forward, shrieking, "Ah, mein Gott—mein Gott!"

are his minion. What do you expect to find out from me?"

"I expect to learn what explosive was used to produce the result that seemed to have such a remarkable effect on you."

"Why do you say that? It had no effect on me. My heart is weak. I am subject to such attacks, and I ward them off with brandy. Some day they will kill me. Then you won't learn any secrets from a dead man, will you?"

"I hope, Professor Seigfried, that you have many years yet to live, and I must further add that I did not expect such a reception as I have received from a man of science, as I was told you were. If you have no information to give to me—very well, that ends it; all you have to do is to say so."

"Who sent you here?"

"No one, as I have repeated once or twice. If any one had, I would give him my opinion of him when I got back. You refuse to tell me anything about the explosive that powdered that gold?"

"Refuse? Of course I refuse! What did you expect? I suppose the man who sent you here thought, because you were an engaging young woman and I an old dotard, I would gabble to you the results of a life's work. Oh, no, no, no! But I am not an old dotard. I have many years to live yet."

"I hope so. Well, I must bid you good morning. I shall go to some one else."

The old man showed his teeth in a forbidding grin.

"It is useless. Your bottle is broken, and the material it contained is dissipated. Not a trace of it is left."

He waved his thin, emaciated hand in the air as he spoke.

"Oh, that doesn't matter in the least," said Jennie. "I have several other bottles here in my satchel."

The professor placed his hands on the arms of his chair and slowly raised himself to his feet.

"You have others," he cried, "other bottles? Let me see them—let me see them!"

"No," replied Jennie, "I won't."

With a speed which, after his recent collapse, Jennie had not expected, the professor ambled round to the door and placed his back against it. The glasses over his eyes seemed to sparkle as if with fire. His talonlike fingers crooked rigidly. He breathed rapidly and was evidently laboring under tense excitement.

"Who knows you came up to see me?" he whispered hoarsely, glaring at her.

Jennie, having arisen, stood there, smoothing down her perfectly fitting glove and answered with a calmness she was far from feeling.

"Who knows I am here? No one but the director of police."

"Oh, the director of police!" echoed the professor, quite evidently abashed by the information. The rigidity of his attitude relaxed, and he became once more the old man he had appeared as he sat in a heap in his chair. "You will excuse me," he muttered, edging round toward his chair again, "I was excited."

"I noticed that you were, professor. But before you sit down again please unlock that door."

"Why?" he asked, pausing on his way to the chair.

"Because I wish it open."

"And I," he said in a higher tone, "wish it to remain locked until we have come to some understanding. I can't let you go out now, but I shall permit you to go unmolested as soon as you have made some explanation to me."

"If you do not unlock the door immediately, I shall take this machine and fling it through the front window out on the street. The crashing glass on the pavement will soon bring some one to my rescue, professor, and, as I have a voice of my own and small hesitation about shouting I shall have little difficulty in directing the strangers where to come."

As Jennie spoke she moved swiftly toward the table on which stood the strange aggregation of reflectors and bent glass tubing.

"No, no, no!" screamed the professor, springing between her and the table. "Touch anything but that—anything but that! Do not disturb it an inch—there is danger—death not only to you and me, but perhaps to the whole city. Keep away from it!"

"Very well, then," said Jennie, stepping back in spite of her endeavor to sustain her self control, "open the door. Open both doors and leave them so. After that, if you remain seated in your chair, I shall not touch the machine, nor shall I leave until I make the explanations you require and you have answered some questions that I shall ask. But I must have a clear way to the stair in case you should become excited again."

"I'll unlock the doors. I'll unlock both doors," replied the old man tremulously, fumbling about his pockets for his keys. "But keep away from that machine unless you want to bring swift destruction on us all."

With an eagerness that retarded his speed the professor, constantly looking over his shoulder at his visitor, unlocked the first door; then hastily he flung open the second and tottered back to his chair, where he collapsed on the tiger skin, trembling and exhausted.

"We may be overheard," he whined. "One can never tell who may sneak quietly up the stair. I am surrounded by spies trying to find out what I am doing."

"Wait a moment," said Jennie.

She went quickly to the outer door, found that it closed with a spring latch, opened and shut it two or three times until she was perfectly familiar with its workings; then she closed it, drew the inner door nearly shut and sat down.

"There," she said, "we are quite safe from interruption, Professor Seigfried, but I must request you not to move from your chair."

"I have no intention of doing so," murmured the old man. "Who sent you? You said you would tell me. I think you owe me an explanation."

"I think you owe me one," replied the girl. "As I told you before, no one sent me. I came here entirely of my own accord, and I shall endeavor to make clear to you exactly why I came. Some time ago there occurred in this city a terrific explosion"—

"Where? When?" exclaimed the old man, placing his hands on the arms of his chair, as if he would rise to his feet.

"Sit where you are," said Jennie firmly, "and I shall tell you all I can about it. The government, for reasons of its own, desires to keep the fact of this explosion a secret, and so very few people outside of official circles know anything about it. I am trying to discover the cause of that disaster."

"Are you—are you working on behalf of the government?" asked the old man eagerly, a tremor of fear in his quavering voice.

"No; I am conducting my investigations quite independently of the government."

"But why? But why? That is what I don't understand."

"I would very much rather not answer that question."

"But that question—everything is involved in that question. I must know why you are here. If you are not in the employ of the government, in whose employ are you?"

"If I tell you," said Jennie, with some hesitation, "will you keep what I say a secret?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" cried the scientist impatiently.

"Well, I am in the service of a London daily newspaper."

"I see, I see, and they have sent you here to publish broadcast over the world all you can find out of my doings. I knew you were a spy the moment I saw you. I should never have let you in."

"My dear sir, the London paper is not aware of your existence even. They have not sent me to you at all. They have sent me to learn, if possible, the cause of the explosion I spoke of. I took some of the debris to Herr Feltz to analyze it, and he said he had never seen gold, iron, feldspar, and all that, reduced to such fine impalpable grains as was the case with the sample I left with him. I then asked him who in Vienna knew most about explosives, and he gave me your address. That is why I am here."

"But the explosion—you have not told me when and where it occurred!"

"That, as I have said, is a government secret."

"But you stated you are not in the government employ. Therefore it can be no breach of confidence if you let me have full particulars."

"I suppose not. Very well, then. The explosion occurred after midnight on the 17th in the vault of the treasury."

The old man, in spite of the prohibition, rose uncertainly to his feet.

Jennie sprang up and said menacingly, "Stay where you are!"

"I am not going to touch you. If you are so suspicious of every move I make, then go yourself and bring me what I

"Don't look at that map!" shrieked the professor.

want. There is a map of Vienna pinned against the wall yonder. Bring it to me."

Jennie proceeded in the direction indicated. It was an ordinary map of the city of Vienna, and as Jennie took it down she noticed that across the southern part of the city a semicircular line in pencil had been drawn and, examining it more closely, saw that the stationary part of the compass had been placed on the spot where stood the building which contained the professor's studio. She paid closer attention to the pencil mark and observed that it passed through the treasury building.

"Don't look at that map!" shrieked the professor, beating the air with his hands. "I asked you to bring it to me. Can't you do a simple action like that without spying about?"

Jennie rapidly unfastened the paper from the wall and brought it to him. The scientist scrutinized it closely, adjusting his glasses the better to see. Then he deliberately tore the map into fragments, numerous and minute. He rose, and this time Jennie made no protest, went to the window, opened it, flung the fluttering bits of paper out into the air, the strong wind carrying them far over the roofs of Vienna. Closing the casement, he came back to his chair.

"Was—was any one hurt at this explosion?" he asked presently.

"Yes; four men were killed instantly; a dozen were seriously injured and are now in hospital."

"Oh, my God—my God!" cried the old man, covering his face with his hands, swaying from side to side in his chair like a man tortured with agony and remorse. At last he lifted a face that had grown more pinched and yellow within the last few minutes.

"I can tell you nothing," he said, moistening his parched lips.

"You mean that you will tell me nothing, for I see plainly that you know everything."

"I knew nothing of any explosion until you spoke of it. What have I to do with the treasury or the government?"

"That is just what I want to know."

"It is absurd. I am no conspirator, but a scientist."

"Then you have nothing to fear, Herr Seigfried. If you are innocent, why are you so loath to give me any assistance in this matter?"

"It has nothing to do with me. I am a scientist—I am a scientist. All I wish is to be left alone with my studies. I have nothing to do with governments or newspapers or anything belonging to them."

Jennie sat tracing a pattern on the dusty floor with the point of her parasol. She spoke very quietly:

"The penciled line which you drew on the map of Vienna passed through the treasury building; the center of the circle was this garret. Why did you draw that penciled semicircle? Why are you anxious that I should not see you had done so? Why did you destroy the map?"

Professor Seigfried sat there looking at her with dropped jaw, but he made no reply.

"If you will excuse my saying so," the girl went on, "you are acting very childishly. It is evident to me that you are no criminal, yet if the director of police had been in my place he would have arrested you long ago, and that merely because of your own foolish actions."

"The map proved nothing," he said at last, haltingly, "and, besides, both you and the director will now have some difficulty in finding it."

"That is further proof of your folly. The director doesn't need to find it. I am here to testify that I saw the map, saw the curved line passing through the treasury and saw you destroy what you thought was an incriminating piece of evidence. It would be much better if you would deal as frankly with me as I have done with you. Then I shall give you the best advice I can—if my advice will be of any assistance to you."

"Yes, and publish it to all the world!"

"It will have to be published to all the world in any case, for, if I leave here without full knowledge, I will simply go to the police office and there tell all I know!"

"And if I do speak you will still go to the director of the police and tell him what you have discovered!"

"No; I give you my word that I will not!"

"What guarantee have I of that?" asked the old man suspiciously.

"No guarantee at all except my word!"

"Will you promise not to print in your paper what I tell you?"

"No; I cannot promise that!"

"Still, the newspaper doesn't matter," continued the scientist. "The story would be valueless to you, because no one would believe it. There is no use in printing a story in a newspaper that will be laughed at, is there? However, I think you are honest. Otherwise you would have promised not to print a line of what I tell you, and then I should have known you were lying. It was as easy to promise that as to say you would not tell the director of police. I thought at first some scientist had sent you here to play the spy on me and learn what I was doing. I assure you I heard nothing about the explosion you speak of, yet I was certain it had occurred somewhere along that line which I drew on the map. I had hoped it was not serious and begun to believe it was not. The anxiety of the last month has nearly driven me insane, and, as you say quite truly, my actions have been childish."

The old man in his excitement had risen from his chair and was now pacing up and down the room, running his fingers distractedly through his long, white hair and talking more to himself than to his auditor.

Jennie had edged her chair nearer to the door and had made no protest against his rising, fearing to interrupt his flow of talk and again arouse his suspicions.

"I have no wish to protect my inventions. I have never taken out a patent in my life. What I discover I give freely to the world, but I will not be robbed of my reputation as a scientist. I want my name to go down to posterity among those of the great discoverers. You talked just now of going to the police and telling them what you knew. Foolish creature! You could no more have gone to the central police office without my permission, or against my will, than you could go to the window and whistle back those bits of paper I scattered to the winds. Before you reached the bottom of the stairs I could have laid Vienna in a mass of ruins. Yes, I could in all probability have blown up the entire empire of Austria. The truth is that I do not know the limit of my power, nor dare I test it."

"Oh, this is a madman!" thought Jennie as she edged still nearer to the door. The old man paused in his walk and turned fiercely upon her.

"You don't believe me?" he said.

"No, I do not," she answered, the color leaving her cheeks.

The aged scientist gave utterance to a hideous chuckle. He took from one of his numerous shelves a hammer head without the handle and for a moment Jennie thought he was going to attack her, but he merely handed the metal to her and said:

"Break that in two. Place it between your palms and grind it to powder."

"You know that is absurd; I cannot do it."

"Why can't you do it?"

"Because it is of steel."

"That is no reason. Why can't you do it?"

He glared at her fiercely over his glasses, and she saw in his wild eye all the enthusiasm of an instructor enlightening a pupil.

"I'll tell you why you can't do it, because every minute particle of it is held together by an enormous force. It may be heated redhot and beaten into this shape and that, but still the force hangs on as tenaciously as the grip of a giant. Now, suppose I had some substance, a drug of which, placed on that piece of iron, would release the force which holds the particles together. What would happen?"

"I don't know," replied Jennie.

"Oh, yes, you do!" cried the professor impatiently. "But you are like every other woman—you won't take the trouble to think. What would happen would be this: The force that held the particles together would be released, and the hammer would fall to powder like that gold you showed me, and there would be an explosion, caused by the sudden release of the power, which would probably wreck this room and extinguish both our lives. You understand that, do you not?"

"Yes, I think I do."

"Well, here is something you won't understand and probably won't believe when you hear it. There is but one force in this world and but one particle of matter. There is only one element, which is the basis of everything. All the different shapes and conditions of things that we see are caused by a mere variation of that force in conjunction with numbers of that particle. Am I getting beyond your depth?"

"I am afraid you are, professor."

"Of course. I know what feeble brains the average woman is possessed of. Still, try to keep that in your mind. Now, listen to this: I have discovered how to disunite that force and that particle. I can with a touch fling loose upon this earth a giant whose strength is irresistible and immeasurable."

"Then why object to making your discovery public?"

"In the first place, because there are still a thousand things and more to be learned along this line of investigation. The moment a man announces his discoveries he is first ridiculed; then, when the truth of what he affirms is proved, there rise in all parts of the world other men who say they knew all about it ten years ago and will prove it, too—at least, far enough to delude a gullible world; in the second place, because I am a humane man—I hesitate to spread broadcast a knowledge that would enable any fool to blow up the universe. Then there is a third reason. There is another who, I believe, has discovered how to make this force loosen its grip on the particle—that is Keely of Philadelphia, in the United States"—

"What! You don't mean the Keely motor man?" cried Jennie, laughing. "That arrant humbug! Why, all the papers in the world have exposed his ridiculous pretensions. He has done nothing but spend other people's money."

"Yes, the newspapers have ridiculed him. Human beings have, since the beginning of the world, stoned their prophets. Nevertheless, he has liberated a force that no gauge made by man can measure. He has been boastful, if you like, and has said that with a teacupful of water he would drive a steamship over the ocean. I have been silent, working away with my eye on him, and he has been working away with his eye on me, for each knows what the other is doing. If either of us discovers how to control this force, then that man's name will go down to posterity forever. He has not yet been able to do it; neither have I. There is still another difference between us—he appears to be able to loosen that force in his own presence; I can only do it at a distance. All my experiments lately have been in the direction of making modifications with this machine, so as to liberate the force within the the compass, say, of this room; but the problem has baffled me. The invisible rays which this machine sends out and which will penetrate stone, iron, wood or any other substance must unite at a focus, and I have not been able to bring that focus nearer me than something over half a mile.

"Last summer I went to an uninhabited part of Switzerland and there continued my experiments. I blew up all will rocks and bowlders on the mountain sides, the distances varying from a mile to half a mile. I examined the results of the disintegration, and when you came in and showed me the gold I recognized at once that some one had discovered the secret I have been trying to fathom for the last ten years. I thought that perhaps you had come from Keely. I am now convinced that the explosion you speak of in the treasury was caused by myself. This machine, which you so recklessly threatened to throw out of the window, accidentally slipped from its support when I was working here some time after midnight on the 17th. I placed it immediately as you see it now, where it throws its rays into midair and is consequently harmless, but I know an explosion must have taken place in Vienna somewhere within the radius of half a mile. I drew the pencil semicircle that you saw on the map of Vienna, for in my excitement in placing the machine upright I had not noticed exactly where it had pointed, but I knew along the line I had drawn an explosion must have occurred and could only hope that it had not been a serious one, which it seems it was. I waited and waited, hardly daring to leave my attic, but hearing no news of any disaster I was torn between the anxiety that would naturally come to any humane man in my position—who did not wish to destroy life—and the fear that if nothing had occurred I had not actually made the discovery I thought I had made. You spoke of my actions being childish, but when I realized that I had myself been the cause of the explosion a fear of criminal prosecution came over me. Not that I should object to imprisonment if they would allow me to continue my experiments, but that doubtless they would not do, for the authorities know nothing of science and care less.

In spite of her initial disgust, Jennie found herself gradually coming to believe in the sincerity of the [illegible] looking [illegible] from time to time [illegible]

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