



THE LORSSON ELOPEMENT

Astro Endeavours to Make the Course of Love Run Smooth

The fourth of a series of five Mystery Stories in which Astro, The Seer, and Valeska, his assistant, use their crystal-gazing and their common-sense to their own and the general good. Astro is supposed to have great occult power, and many people who have private troubles come to him for aid. The Seer has a keen appreciation of all modern foolishness.

By ALAN BRAGHAMPTON *

THE Master of Mysteries entered the great studio smiling, and, without removing his overcoat or silk hat, threw himself on the divan and chuckled.

Valeska, his assistant, looked up from her desk with a question in her eyes, though she did not speak. As Astro did not seem inclined to answer, she resumed her work with the finger prints. Each one of these, printed in pale red ink on a small sheet of bristol board, she examined carefully, then with a pencil she traced out the primary figure formed by the capillary lines starting from the microscopic triangle on the inside of the finger, where the lines, coming from the back, first separated, and then following the curve till it met the corresponding little triangle or "island" on the outside of the finger. The axes of this diagram were then drawn, and the pattern thus defined was entered on the card index as an "Invaded Loop," an "Arched Spiral," or a "Whorl," according to Galton's classification.

So absorbing was her work that it took her whole attention, and she did not think again of her employer until he spoke aloud. He had thrown off his overcoat and put on his oriental turban and his red silk robe to be ready for patrons. No visitors had yet appeared to interview the palmist, however, and Astro was lazily puffing his narghile.

"Valeska," he said at last, between two long inhalations of the water pipe, "did you ever try to put out a fire in the grate by covering the front with a blower?"

She laid down her pencil and looked up smiling. "Why, no. It only makes the fire burn the hotter, doesn't it?"

He nodded his head gravely. "Precisely. And yet that's what Mrs. Lorsson is doing with her daughter Ruth."

Valeska waited for something more.

"I had an interesting time there to-day," he went on. "There were a dozen or more pretty well known society women at her tea, and they were all crazy to have me read their palms, of course. That was all stupid enough, until Ruth Lorsson came in. Have you ever seen her?"

"Oh, yes," said Valeska. "A pretty girl about eighteen, with dark eyes and dark hair, isn't she? She always looks so innocent that I want to pet her."

"You needn't worry. She has somebody to pet her, if I'm not mistaken. And as for being timid and innocent well, you never can tell by the looks; that is, unless you see what I saw." He smiled again mysteriously.

"Is she in love then?" Valeska asked.

"Without doubt, by her handwriting, which I saw a sample of,—you should have seen the double curve in the crossing of her T's,—and by her heart line too, for that matter; and by her general appearance and demeanour, most decidedly. But I had better proof than all that."

"Why, was he there? I could have told in an instant, I'm sure."

"No, he wasn't there; but another man was; and, though it was evident that Mrs. Lorsson considers him eligible and is trying to make a match of it, Ruth hates him. Of course you or any bright woman could have seen that as well as I."

"Then how did you find out specifically?"

"Why, in a surreptitious way, I must admit. You know that Mrs. Lorsson wanted to exploit me as the latest fad, and she insisted that I should come in costume. Very well, I was willing to oblige. Mrs. Lorsson is rich and influential, and I made out my bill accordingly."

"Well, I was shown up into Miss Ruth's room to dress. There on her secretary I happened to see her blotter covered with figures. It had been writing, I shouldn't have read it; but I confess that that list of numbers piqued my curiosity, and I looked at it. It wasn't a sum, or anything like that. It occurred to me at first glance that it was a cipher. I don't know why,—perhaps because the thing seemed so

meaningless. At any rate, it interested me, and I made a copy. Here it is:"

He pulled out a notebook and showed Valeska the list.

3	36	91	2	101	91
4	36	91	43	98	91
5	36	91			
1	81	91	8	341	91
11	61	91	71	96	91

"What do you make of it?"

"Why, nothing as yet. It's absolutely meaningless," Valeska looked up.

"I agree with you so far. But let me tell you the rest of the story. Ruth is, as you know, a very pretty young girl; but she's more than that,—she's clever. Of course the cleverness of eighteen isn't quite so deep as the cleverness of maturity; but I think she is intelligent enough to keep that stepmother of hers guessing. Of course one of the first things I said was that she was in love. Her stepmother denied it so indignantly that I immediately smelled a mouse. Ruth didn't betray herself; but I noticed that the young man who was present immediately began to take notice. He is Sherman Fuller, and, I imagine from what I heard, a millionaire in his own right. Decidedly an eligible! The way Mrs. Lorsson managed him was wonderful. There's no doubt that if she can throw Ruth at his head, she'll do it. He seemed to be perfectly willing; but Ruth scarcely looked at him. When she did, it was with scorn. It was easy enough to see how the land lay. She was in love with someone else."

"Well, I had used my eyes pretty well when I was up in her room, and had noticed several things. Among these were, first, a Bible on her bookshelf, a half-filled box of caramels, a copy of 'The Star' with one page torn out, and so on. I tried what the spiritualistic mediums call a 'fishing test' on her, saying that I thought she was very religious. She smiled rather cynically; but her stepmother thought it was wonderful. 'Why, Ruth goes up to her room every night after dinner to read her Bible!' she exclaimed. I next informed her that she was fond of sweet things, and her stepmother corroborated me by saying that she bought a box of candy every day or two."

"The rest was easy, and doesn't matter. But I could see that she was strictly chaperoned. She didn't go out of the room without Mrs. Lorsson's asking her where she was going, and from the conversation I inferred that she went nowhere alone. I was certain it was not alone mere conventionally Mrs. Lorsson watches her. As I was going out, a maid brought some letters in on a salver. One was for Miss Ruth. Mrs. Lorsson opened it calmly, as if it was for herself, glanced it over, and handed it to her stepdaughter. I have no doubt that the letters Miss Ruth writes are inspected as well."

"Isn't it awful?" sighed Valeska. "I thought that sort of thing had all gone nowadays."

"Not when you have a stepdaughter, and an eligible young millionaire to marry her to," said Astro. "That woman is a tyrant and a schemer. There's little love lost in that family, I'm sure. But now look at the cipher again."

"First, let me think," Valeska said thoughtfully, holding the paper in her hand. "Here's a young girl that is having a young man whom she doesn't like forced upon her. She is probably in love with another; but is not allowed to see him or to write to him. Well, I'd manage to communicate with him in some way."

"Yes, and you're clever, for eighteen, and you read the Bible every night after dinner."

"Oh!" Valeska's eyes grew bright. "Then these figures refer to Bible texts? But that was the way our grandmothers wrote interlarding their messages with scriptural quotations. I don't really believe Ruth is so religious as that."

"Ah, you don't know your Bible then," Astro rejoined, as he went to a bookcase and took down a copy. "Why, it's the most wonderful book in the world in more ways than one! It not only contains the sum of human and divine wisdom, but it contains almost every message that one might wish to

send. Why, it's a ready made lover's codex! It isn't only the Song of Songs that contains beautiful love messages, I assure you. They're scattered all through the book."

Then these figures must refer to the chapters and verses," Valeska said, scrutinizing the numbers.

"And the books," Astro added.

Valeska still puzzled over the list of figures. "The numbers seem too high for that."

"And there's our first clue. Now let us examine the columns in detail. We'd naturally expect the number of the book to come first, the chapter next, and the verse last. The highest number in the first row is 71. But there are only sixty-six books in the Bible; so that can't be the number of any book. Taking the second column, we see that the highest number is 341. But the longest book in the Bible, the book of Psalms, has only one hundred and fifty chapters, so that column can't give the chapter numbers—as it is, at least. The third column has only the number 91. That can't be the number of every verse."

He waited for Valeska. She frowned prettily as she studied it out. For some time her look was intense, rapt. Then, as if some idea passed from him to her, her smile came radiantly, and she exclaimed:

"The figures are reversed! What a slyboots she is!"

Astro smiled also. "Of course I saw that at the first glance. There is a direct corroboration of it plainly evident. In the first place, 91 reversed is 19, the number in biblical order of the book of Psalms, which has more personal messages than any other book; and second we get the chapter 143, which could come from no other book, of course. Now let us try and see what we get. I'll begin at the top, the sixty-third Psalm, verses three, four, and five." And he read aloud:

Because thy loving kindness is better than life, my lips shall praise thee.

Thus will I bless thee while I live: I will lift up my hands in thy name.

My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness: and my mouth shall praise thee with joyful lips.

"It's pretty, isn't it?" he asked.

The tears had come into Valeska's eyes. "Oh, it's beautiful!" she exclaimed. "No one could call it sacrilegious, even though she has used the words that apply to the Almighty for her own lover. She's a dear! It seems wrong to pry into so charming a secret; but I'm dying to hear the rest of it."

Astro put down the cipher. "This is evidently only one side of the correspondence, you must remember. If we are to get it all, we must find his answers. That's a little more difficult."

"It seems impossible to me," said Valeska. "You only happened on this. I wouldn't know where to look for his messages."

He sat down and looked at her seriously. "The only way is to use your imagination and your memory. Put yourself in her place. You can't trust servants or mails. You are watched everywhere except in your own room. Think it out; concentrate your mind on the problem."

Valeska dropped her head on her hand thoughtfully, and spoke as if to herself. "Let's see. I am in my own room alone. I read my Bible and pick out appropriate messages. But how do I get them to him?" She looked up, puzzled.

"Never mind that now. How does he communicate with you?"

"There's a box of candy there, and a newspaper—" She paused and then, gazing at him through narrowed eyes, went on. "It must be through the paper; I can't see any other way possible. No one would suspect that, if the message was concealed. It might be in the 'Personal' column."

"That's too easy, and it might be noticed. Besides, 'The Star' has no 'Personals.'"

"Then— It couldn't be in a news item; for he wouldn't be sure of its being inserted, even if he was a reporter. It must be in an advertisement."

He went into the waiting room, and returned with a copy of "The Star."

"Correct," he said. "That's the only possible