

have to pay that in blackmail, I suppose. If you can think of any way to return the jewels and no questions asked, and head off this insanity charge, the money's yours."

"Had any dowry been settled on Count D'Ampleri?"

Shaw flushed faintly. "Oh, I say!" he began. "I am aware that it's a Continental practice, that's all," Astro said suavely. "It is inevitable with an international marriage, isn't it?"

"Yes. I fought against it as hard as I could; but Ethel can make the governor do anything she likes. Besides, my mother was set on the match. You know, and she helped arrange all that. They do it through lawyers, you know. It isn't quite so crude as it sounds; but it's bad enough. Yes, we arranged to buy the title for Ethel, I suppose." He kept his eyes on the rug in some embarrassment. There was too a trace of anger in his tone. It was evident that the affair did not please him in any way.

"Very well. I'll undertake the commission, delicate as it is," Astro said, rising. "I'd like to have the jewels delivered here sometime next week. You had best bring them yourself. I wish also you'd find out just when the Count D'Ampleri arrived in America, and by what boat. I suppose you can tell me the day and hour of your sister's birth?"

Shaw wheeled round on him. "Oh, come now!" he protested. "I came to you because you know or ought to know most of the weaknesses of human nature; but if you think I take any stock in astrology or occultism—"

"What was the day, did you say?" Astro's voice was hard.

"October 14th, 1885; nine a.m., I believe." Shaw scowled.

"My dear Mr. Shaw," said Astro, "if you give me this commission, you must let me do it my own way. It won't matter to you, I should think, how I do it. You are, I presume, an agnostic. Very good, I am a fatalist. Go to a detective or a doctor, if you prefer modern science. I prefer the ancient lore."

"I came to you because you've done harder things than this," Shaw said to placate the independent seer. "Go ahead with your cusps and nativities, if you like, only get us out of this fearful mess as safely and quickly as you can."

"I hope to see you on Monday," said Astro, bowing with dignity.

John Wallington Shaw left the room. As soon as he had departed, Valeska entered, laughing, the dimples showing in her cheeks and chin.

Astro's pose had gone. He threw off his robe and turban. "Did you hear the uncouth history?" he asked.

Valeska nodded. "Of all things! Can it be true?"

"Easily. Simple as milk. And at the same time one of the cleverest schemes I ever heard of. It's all straight; that is, all except the jewels. That we'll have to investigate."

"But I don't understand it at all," Valeska pouted.

"Have you happened to hear that Count D'Ampleri has been paying rather too marked attention, for an engaged man, to Miss Belle Miller, she that the cruel wits of the 400 have dubbed the 'Bay Mare'?"

"I knew she was in here one day for a reading."

"And was much interested in my prediction that she was to marry a titled foreigner. I heard the gossip at the Lorrsons the day I went to that tea. I never forget items of that sort. They are more important than horoscopes."

"I think I have a glimmer of light now," said Valeska. "The Bay Mare is an heiress, isn't she?"

"Rather! Old man Miller owns half of Buffalo."

"And Shaw is on the verge of failure."

"And the Count wants a good excuse to transfer his affections and his hopes of a permanent income. What better escape than to impute insanity to Miss Ethel Shaw? I say it's a merry scheme."

Valeska frowned. "It's horribly cruel."

"Well, it's infamously Italian, if you like. Fancy one of the Borgias reappearing to grace the twentieth century! But you can't deny it is cleverly worked out. Insanity is one of the best reasons for not marrying, even for a fortune hunting foreigner. Everyone will pity him, instead of blaming him, and he'll walk out of the Shaw family into the arms of the Millers. He only wanted to be well off with the old love before he was on with the new. But I'll forgive him anything for the sake of the automobile goggles."

"And the Peter Pan collar!" cried Valeska, laughing. "Couldn't you hear me giggling in the closet?"

"The Lander jewels, though," said Astro thoughtfully. "If it wasn't for them, one might suspect that Miss Ethel had taken an overdose of headache powders. Acetanilid does affect the brain, you know."

"The question is, Who played the gorilla?"

"Ah, an Italian, I'm afraid. If you'll pardon the pun, I think that garlic puts us on the scent. As I see it, it's a case where our whilom friend McGraw can help us out. I'll try him. There'll be no particular credit in it for him; but, what's just as good, there'll be money."

From an interview with his friend the police lieutenant that night Astro found out that no one had been suspected of the robbery of Mrs. Lander's jewels strongly enough to warrant arrest. Ethel Shaw and her fiancée were both present at the Lander reception held on the night when the jewels were stolen. A charge of kleptomania might, therefore, be reasonably preferred against her. As young Shaw had said, such an accusation, coupled with her testimony as to the method by which she obtained the jewels, would deal a serious blow to the Shaw's social aspirations.

McGraw had too often profited by Astro's assistance in puzzling cases not to do his best to help



"From your friends in the Lunatic Asylum," the Creature said

the palmist; but nothing was known by the police about the Count or his valet. It was found, however, that on his passage across the Atlantic in the *Penumbria* Count D'Ampleri had taken no servant. This of itself was of sufficient importance for Astro to request McGraw to look up the man and furnish a description of him and his circumstances. This, in a few days, revealed the fact that the valet had a dubious reputation, and it was suspected that he had been in prison. McGraw himself was not sure at first; but subsequently a brother officer familiar with the Italian quarter of New York positively identified him as Kneesy Tim, who had done time for second-storey work, and was so called among his pals on account of his knock knees.

It did not take the officer long after that to ascertain through the detective force that Tim had attended the Lander reception as Count D'Ampleri's valet. The line of evidence was now direct. Tim had welded the most important link of it himself by appearing as the bearer of the stolen jewels. His boldness was accounted for, of course, by the fact that he relied on his ludicrous appearance to make Miss Shaw's story incredible, at the same time preventing any identification of himself. In all this it was impossible not to suspect the Count of being an accessory; if, indeed, he did not plan the whole thing.

But why had the thief been willing to surrender such valuable booty? If the Count was really after money, here was a treasure in the hands of his accomplice. The answer was an easy one for Astro to solve when Shaw produced the black bag full of Mrs. Lander's heirlooms.

The jewels were all false. Astro's critical eyes needed but one careful look at them. They were marvellous imitations; but of no possible use to anyone except the owner, who would never be suspected of having hypothecated her celebrated gems. It was evident now why Mrs. Lander—the respectable, aristocratic Mrs. Lemuel Lander, of the Lander jewels—had never offered a reward for their capture. Astro, cynical as he was, familiar as he was with the many hypocrisies of the upper ten of the town, could not help laughing when he held the famous Lander tiara up to Valeska's envious view.

"I'll never believe in anybody or anything again!" she exclaimed. "Did you tell Mr. Shaw?"

"Not after his remarks on my profession," said Astro, with a decided shake of his head. "That's the time he did himself out of a hearty laugh at Mrs. Lander's expense. In any case, I don't believe in ever telling any more than is necessary."

"The Count is an ordinary crook, then?"

"I doubt that. Nor is he even an ordinary Count. He's a clever, bourgeois Frenchman. I have talked with him and know. I imagine that he picked up this fellow Tim to help him play the part, and found out afterward what he was and used him. But that doesn't matter. We have them now on the hip."

"And how are you going to fix him? From what I hear, he is more attentive than ever to the Bay Mare, and people are talking about it."

"That doesn't matter. If Miss Ethel can get rid of him without his telling that ridiculous story, she'll undoubtedly call it good riddance to bad rubbish. And I will fix that."

"How?"

"My dear, if you'll walk up and down on Eighth avenue, between 37th and 38th streets, from ten till half-past ten to-morrow night, you'll see. And," he continued, smiling to himself, "I think it will be worth your attendance. I think we might ask Shaw to escort you, if he's willing to disguise himself a little, enough so that the Count won't recognise him."

"I shall be there," said Valeska.

"I promise a comedy," said Astro. "By the by, it may interest you to know that I have rented a room at No. 573 Eighth avenue."

"Indeed?" said Valeska, raising her brows. "I imagine from your tone that I'm not to ask you any questions; but I would like to know if you are through with McGraw."

"No, indeed. McGraw is to figure as the *Deus ex machina*; also he is to earn two thousand dollars. One he will collect from me, and one from Mrs. Lander, who will be very glad to pay, I imagine, if he acts strictly *ex cathedra*. In other words, it is not particularly to Mrs. Lander's interest for the public to know that she has sold her jewels and wears paste."

"I begin dimly to comprehend now," Valeska mused. "You will emulate the Mikado of Japan, and let the punishment fit the crime?"

Astro replied, "My dear, in the mutual interaction of telepathic vibrations, one neutralises the other. Two loud sounds can be made to produce a silence. Selah. *Tara ak khaldah maha tara. abracadabra, maha tara.*"

"Boom-de-ay!" Valeska added gaily.

"Precisely. And, speaking of nonsense, I didn't ask you to get me a pair of white duck trousers and a yellow striped blazer and an old woman's wig and a green umbrella and a white top hat, did I?" He looked thoughtfully at his fingernails.

"No, you didn't," she replied briskly; "nor a bottle of soothing syrup nor a tombstone."

"Nevertheless, you will do this to-morrow morning, and have them sent to No. 573 Eighth avenue."

"I agree, if you'll only let me add some rubber boots."

"Well, as a special favour, yes. Now run along and I'll get to work. Oh, Tim was arrested to-day, on suspicion of having stolen the Lander jewels. Too bad, isn't it?"

He sat down, thereupon, to write a letter as follows:

*Terribile sbaglio fatto. Voi siete in gran pericolo. Incontratemi martedì a mezzanotte nell'entrata del No. 573 Ottava Avenue. Venite solo.* T.

(Continued on page 21)