

right eye in his lens and using it so much. Or possibly—by Jove! a diamond cutter! Queer, isn't it?"

"Decidedly. But they seem to be sure enough of their position here. They're as well received as the other guests."

"There's something awry. I wish I could get it. It's all there in my brain, but I haven't time to think it out, now and here. Never mind! Only wait, and be ready! Come, we'll go in. I'll talk to you later. Here's Mrs. Selwyn now."

Their hostess sailed past on a young man's arm, and, holding out a hand, carried Astro in with her to a seat at the end of the room. Valeska was promptly annexed by Selwyn, a short, puffy little man with muttonchop whiskers and a big stomach. He had the air of not being at all at home in his own house. Nobody could seem so harmless and timid as this chubby, round-faced host. He might have been an awkward servant, in his endeavours to efface himself. At seeing Valeska left alone, he offered his arm in a sudden access of courage. She was not like the others, and apparently he was not afraid of her.

"Infernal humbug, all this sort of thing!" he grumbled.

"Why, what do you mean?" she answered, a little surprised.

"Having this fool palm reader here, and all that. Bosh!"

Valeska could scarcely repress a titter. But Selwyn was evidently quite serious about it. Seeing that he had no idea who she was, she humoured him.

"It is nonsense, of course," she said gravely; "but I think that Mr. Astro is quite modest about it, don't you?"

"Oh, he's all right—he has to make a living, I suppose—but the women make such fools of themselves about him. I might as well give a monkey dinner and be done with it!"

Muttering thus, in an inconsequent, petulant way, he led her into the dining room, where she was immediately surrounded by men who offered her chairs, plates, and refreshments. Selwyn, more than ever disgruntled, retired to the wall, against which he flattened himself, and gloomily regarded the crowd. Valeska, besieged as she was, threw him a smile and a remark occasionally, pitying his discomfort and his timidity.

Meanwhile, her eyes were busy in the room. Once she caught sight of the green-eyed Countess talking with the pompadoured man, and she noted a certain surreptitious haste in their encounter. It was furtive, suggestive, or did she merely fancy it? From them, her glance wandered to the group of which Astro, with Mrs. Selwyn, was the centre. The Countess joined it, sparkling, vivid, keen. A heavy, soggy dowager in black silk, with an extraordinarily low cut dress, plump, round neck and innumerable curls in her gray hair, was absorbed in Astro's conversation. A debutante, as fresh as a lily, ingenuous, eager, bright-eyed with curiosity, leaned over his shoulder, holding out her hand for him to read. Valeska heard little gushes of laughter whenever he spoke. She had never before seen him in such a company, and it amazed her to see how he dominated it, how his magnetism radiated and drew one after another into his circle of influence.

So it went on for half an hour, until the party began gradually to leave the room, drifting out in twos and threes, all more or less stimulated by the supper and the champagne to an increasing good fellowship. All that is, excepting poor Selwyn, who seemed to shrink smaller and smaller. He hardly spoke to anybody, except to apologise to some woman for stepping on her train, or to call a waiter to pass cigars or wine. His round eyes winked continually, and his lips moved as if he was talking to himself. When Valeska looked at him with an arch smile, he beamed like a child upon her for an instant, and the next all the light went out of his face.

She met Astro in the hall, passed him, and caught a sign. It was the "up and down" signal this time, denoting whom she was to observe—a glance up to the ceiling, and down to his feet. His hand touched his hair with a little flourish. The man with the pompadour! She had it as plain as words could tell it.

She drifted away and sought the man with the pompadour. He was nowhere to be seen. The party was now humming with talk and laughter, and the double salon was crowded. The orchestra swept into a Hungarian rhapsody which seemed to waft a wave of abandon into the room. The men that followed her flirted persistently; it was all she could do now to parry their jests and at the same time keep track of what was going on about her. Astro was standing near the centre of the room in a group of wonderfully dressed and wonderfully

pretty women, each perfect, finished, poised, yet animated and merry. Their little aigrets nodded as they talked and laughed. Selwyn, his hands in his pockets, moodily effaced himself behind the piano in the corner. Every time he saw Valeska, he beamed.

As she stood near the great hall doors, new men were continually brought up to her to be introduced, each with a new compliment or a flippant remark or a joke, each showing a friendly rivalry with the others. Valeska enjoyed it all excitedly. She could recognise the nervous pitch in her voice, as she shot her frivolous retorts; but the newness of it all stimulated her. For the moment she lost sight of the pompadoured man. She was gazing across the room to where Mrs. Selwyn stood, when—

Suddenly the lights in the two chandeliers went out! The room for an instant seemed as black as night. Several women cried out in fright, and then a light chorus of laughter rippled round the room hysterically. In the instantaneous cessation of talk, a shuffling of feet was for a moment all that was heard.

The picture in Valeska's view remained for a moment in her eyes as clear as a photograph against the darkness: Mrs. Selwyn, merry, jubilant, talking to a fat old man; behind her the dowager, the debutante, the pale youth, all talking together; and a little aloof, the Countess, with a strange expression, and her fan pressed to her lips, looking in Valeska's direction—as if she was giving a sign! Then the picture faded; a babble of voices arose. Then,



The Missing Emerald Fell to the Floor

mounting over them all, rising to a scream, Mrs. Selwyn's excited cry:

"Oh! Stop! Help! I'm robbed!"

Valeska at the same moment felt a man rush swiftly past her, and there was a sharp twitch at the side of her waist.

Then another voice came like a bark, swift, stern, mandatory, abrupt, angry. "Light up there immediately! The switch is at the side of the door. Don't anyone dare to move till we have a light!"

At last, after a frightened half-minute, full of whispers and shocked expletives, the lights sprang up again, and showed a room full of shocked, agonised faces. Everyone looked at his neighbour with startled eyes. A louder buzzing of talk arose, only to cease suddenly again as Selwyn, pushing his way into the middle of the room, took command of the situation, like a General.

"Nobody shall move a step here until we find out what's the matter! My wife has lost her brooch, the Selwyn emerald. You all know it. I insist that everyone keep his place until it is found!"

What had awakened in the little man? At the crisis he had changed from a bashful boy into a wilful, assertive man, dominating the room with his resolution. The talk swept excitedly about the place now; each questioned his neighbour, or stared spellbound. Meanwhile, Selwyn had walked to the folding doors and rolled them shut with a bang. Then, red-faced, with a fierce scowl, he strode back to his wife:

"Now who was near you, Betty?"

"Oh, I don't remember exactly," she answered hysterically. "All I know is that when the lights went out some one came up to me and I felt a snatch at my corsage—see where the lace is torn! Somebody stole it. It's preposterous!"

"Search everybody!" somebody called out.

"No, no!" cried others.

"See if it hasn't dropped on the floor!"

For a moment everyone spoke at once, and the confusion was maddening. Then, suddenly clapping his hands for silence, and speaking as sharply as an officer commanding his soldiers, Astro's voice rose over the tumult. He had sprung upon a chair, and his fine head appeared above the throng.

"Mr. Selwyn, let me find the brooch. There will be no trouble, no unpleasantness for anyone. Let everyone keep his place until I've finished, and I'll promise to discover the emerald."

A clapping of hands all over the room responded to his speech. Instantly the mood of the company relaxed from its nervous strain of uncomfortable embarrassment and suspicion to an amused interest.

But Selwyn shook his head savagely. "No indeed! None of your parlour tricks, thank you! I will send for the police immediately. Meanwhile, everyone in this room is my prisoner. Those who object must necessarily be regarded with suspicion."

"Oh, George!" Mrs. Selwyn pleaded, "do let Astro try it! I'm sure he'll be able to do it. He's so clever, and he has done such marvellous things!"

"Yes, yes! Let him try it!" came from everyone.

Selwyn hesitated, looking half-contemptuously at the palmist. "How do you propose to find it?" he asked finally.

Astro put his hand to his head and drew his brows together. "I already feel an influence disturbing the gathering," he said. "I shall be drawn inevitably toward the person who committed the theft, as if by a magnet. Or at least I shall be drawn to the emerald," he added.

"Bosh!" Selwyn exclaimed. "That's all poppycock! What I want is a good detective and a police officer or two to search every man and woman in the room."

At this there came an indignant chorus of protest; the guests stirred uneasily.

"Mr. Selwyn, do you believe in the X ray?" Astro asked.

The little man grunted. "Yes, I do; but this is no time for a lecture!"

"One moment, please, however! Nobody knows in just what part of the spectrum the X rays lie, except that they are beyond the ultraviolet. They are visible only with the fluoroscope. Nobody knows just where the so called actinic rays lie, either. They are invisible also; but they react upon a plate sensitised with nitrate of silver. Where are the N rays, which emanate from the human body? Nobody knows; but I tell you, Mr. Selwyn, that they are registered in the gray matter of my brain. I am sensitive to them, as no one else has been, consciously, for centuries. And it is that sensitiveness that I propose to utilise. No thought can exist without modifying the molecular structure of the brain cells in the thinker. That change acts upon the ether, and is transmitted in vibratory form. Is it not possible that those ether waves can react upon the molecules in my brain and set up a corresponding change to that made by the original thought? Mr. Selwyn, I'll prove it!"

Astro's voice had risen to a strident tone, compelling and incisive. Everyone looked at him eagerly. There was a hush. Then a volley of exclamations broke out like a storm, and Selwyn's last objections were swept away.

At last the host, overborne, and himself piqued with curiosity, gave a gesture of acquiescence. Astro stepped down from the chair, with a fixed look in his eyes, and gazed eagerly to right and left. He paused one moment, standing with his hand to his forehead, his little finger pointed upward. Valeska saw and read the signal.

"Follow the person I point out!"

He then walked up to the dowager with whom he had been at supper time. "Will you kindly take off your left glove, Mrs. Postelthwaite?" he asked.

"The idea!" she ejaculated. "Why, what do you mean? Do you dare insinuate that I took Mrs. Selwyn's brooch?"

Her eyes were as wide open as a doll's, and her anger was ludicrous to the company who watched her. For the first time since the lights went out, there was a hearty laugh all over the salon.

"Silence!" Astro commanded harshly. He turned to the gaping matron. "Madam, you must do what I ask, and do it quickly, so as not to delay the recovery! If you are innocent, you have nothing to fear. If you hesitate, we can't, of course, be blamed for suspecting you."

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