



MRS. SELWYN'S EMERALD

Astro the Seer Takes Part in a Drawing Room Mystery

The second 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 *

"Monsieur Astro and Miss Wynne!" As they were announced and made their

way toward their hostess, the buzz of conversation in the reception room was for a moment hushed. Women watched through curious eyes the distinguished, picturesque figure of the Master of Mysteries, whispered to one another, and noted critically the face and costume of the beautiful girl who accompanied the lion of the evening. Men glanced with amused contempt at Astro's oriental face, and scrutinised Valeska Wynne more indulgently. The murmur arose again, and the temporary stillness that had followed the announcement of Astro's name gave way to motion and persiflage.

The room fairly scintillated with lights, reflected from the cut glass pendants of the electric chandeliers, smouldering in the dusky gold carvings, twinkling from the jewels on women's necks and breasts, gleaming from the polished oak parquet floor. The large double salon of the Selwyns' was about half filled; there were not yet too many present to hide the elegance of the highly decorated Louis XIV. rooms which inclosed the brilliant company as in an ornate frame. The ceiling, frescoed in the panels with nymphs and cupids, seemed faintly to reflect the life below; the tall mirrors multiplied the complexity of mysterious distances; there was an odour of winter roses which mingled with the perfumes of dainty women. An orchestra sounded languorously from the balcony at the head of the wide staircase.

"I'm delighted!" Mrs. Selwyn exclaimed effusively, leaning gracefully forward with a swan-like movement. She was a deliciously, almost a foolishly, pretty creature, with her bright smile accented by a black beauty spot at the corner of her mouth, with her slender little fingers flashing with jewels, with her lovely neck and her fair hair. It was hard to believe her a matron.

Astro, in his masculine way as striking a figure as she, presented his assistant. Valeska seemed more human than either. There was little artifice in her appearance; her costume was girlishly simple. One was not tempted even for a moment to let his eyes wander from her earnest, pretty face.

"I'm so glad to see you, Miss Wynne!" Mrs. Selwyn scarcely gave her a glance and returned spiritedly to Astro. "My dear," she said archly, "I had no idea that I had captured such a lion. People are simply wild about you! Why, I've made a sensation already by merely inviting you, I assure you! Not that I didn't know you were famous and popular and all that, of course; but, dear me, it's a positive rage! You have no idea what stories I've been hearing about you! They say you can read one's thoughts, and go through a stone wall, and eat fire, and conjure the dead—and dear knows what! I'm actually afraid of you!"

"And I of you also, madam—in that gown."

She spread her hands demurely down her side and looked up at him from under her lashes. She wore a costume of silken mesh, sheer and delicate, over cloth of silver, touched Frenchily with black. The base of her corsage was caught by an immense square cut emerald, set in small blue diamonds. Mrs. Selwyn was evidently not beyond being pleased at Astro's compliment; but her look suggested an unsatisfied desire.

"They're expecting something wonderful," she hinted.

Astro frowned. "My dear lady," he began.

She nodded and shook her fan lightly. "Oh yes, I know. I sha'n't ask you, of course. I promised. But at the same time if something—anything—should happen, you know, it would be perfectly lovely; and it would make the thing go, wouldn't it? Oh, and there's an Italian countess here, whose hand I'm simply dying to have you read!"

Valeska, smiling amusedly at her hostess' prattle, was about to turn away, when Mrs. Selwyn caught her hand eagerly.

"It was so good of you to have come on so

unconventional an invitation! We must make you at home. You shall have positively all the men you want; I have armies of 'em to-night. And perhaps," here Mrs. Selwyn became almost coquettish, "you may have more influence with Astro than poor I. Do talk to him! Countess Trixola will be so disappointed if you don't succeed!"

A fresh group of guests here interrupted her, and she turned to welcome them.

Valeska took Astro's arm again, and he led her to a corner of the room where they could view the assembly.

"I see what's coming," he began hurriedly. "I'll be at my wits' end to avoid doing parlour tricks to amuse this crowd, in spite of what Mrs. Selwyn promised. I won't have much time to attend to you, my dear. But really you did beautifully. Nobody would ever imagine that you were born in an East Side tenement. Why, I think you can tell the would-bes and the bounders as quickly as I can, already. It's all worth seeing, and I want you to use your eyes. Watch every little thing as if it was all of the utmost importance and you were to use every bit of information you acquired. But don't on any account lose sight of me, if you can help it, and watch for my signals. Be ready for anything. It's the accidents of life by which we profit, and there is no predicting accidents. Give me the 'up and down' sign if you discover anything particularly interesting. Well, I'll see that you are introduced. I'm going to be mobbed."

"Here's the Countess, I'll wager," Valeska said. A tall, ashen haired, limp, and insipid youth was bearing toward them, escorting a vivacious, green-eyed brunette, with a narrow, alert face and eyes heavily shadowed. Nearer, those dark eyes seemed a bit hard and glassy; but they were quick. She was considerably made up; but her rouge had been applied cleverly.

Astro had time only to remark out of one corner of his mouth, "Look at her right hand!" and then the Countess was fairly bubbling over him.

Valeska gave the hand a glance. It hung, white gloved, lightly by her side, the first and second fingers tentatively outstretched, the third and fourth curled toward the palm, the thumb projecting.

"You are Astro the Palmist, aren't you?" the woman asked gaily, tipping her head to one side and peeping over her fan. "Mrs. Selwyn said I mustn't bother you; but I do hope something extraordinary is going to happen! We're expecting something quite miraculous, after all we've heard about your occult powers!"

"My dear Countess," said Astro, a bit cynically, "even saints must have holidays. I'm afraid I am out of miracles to-night."

"But at least you can tell me something about myself before you go?" she insisted.

Astro smiled quizzically. "Surely not in public?"

The pale youth burst into a guffaw. The Countess shook her finger at him airily.

"Why, my life is an open book!" she protested. "Be careful that it's open at a blank page, then."

The pale youth again bellowed and was struck on the shoulder by the Countess' fan.

"Oh, I hope I'm naughty enough to be nice," she said demurely.

"Madam," said Astro, with a queer expression, "I doubt if you could be either naughtier or nicer."

"Well! what d'you think of that?" she cried. "Why, positively, I don't know whether it's the nicest kind of compliment or the worst kind of insult!"

"I leave it to your conscience—and your vanity," said Astro calmly.

She laughed it off and turned to Valeska. "Does he say such enigmatical things to you too?" she asked.

"Oh, he doesn't dare," said Valeska. "He knows that I'd take them all as compliments."

The group were now joined by others eagerly pressing about them to listen to the dialogue. The fame of the Master of Mysteries had grown wonderfully with the reports of his recent exploits, and his reputation as a palmist was almost eclipsed by his fame as a seer and solver of inexplicable problems. The distinction of his appearance and charm

of his manner gave him a personal influence as well, and on this first appearance in society in the role of guest he was, as Mrs. Selwyn had said, an immense success.

Valeska's reception was as flattering. She had passed the ordeal of introduction cleverly. The men flocked to this pretty blond girl with the hazel eyes, as to a popular heiress. Unused as she had been to fashionable life, her native wit and confidence, combined with Astro's own support, carried her through with colours flying. The affair soon resolved itself into a rivalry among the women for Astro's whimsical notice, and among the men for Valeska's flashing sallies.

To all hinted requests for character readings, the palmist offered polished and affable excuses. He seemed as much at home in this smart company as in his own picturesque studio. Women gathered about him, fascinated by his romantic personality, and rather pleasantly afraid of his powers as an occultist. Mrs. Selwyn persistently showed him off; but, anxious as she evidently was to make her reception a success, kept to the letter of her promise and did not ask him to perform any tricks for the company.

The salon filled. The talk became gayer. Astro had no time now to speak confidentially to Valeska; but from time to time he sent her a look, a motion of head or hand, which directed her attention to one or another of the party. The quick witted girl watched him everywhere he went, and followed his cues on the instant. Long practice had made it easy for her to communicate with him thus; but this was the first public test of her facility. She played their game with a new zest, her bright eyes and high colour alone betraying her excitement.

At last supper was announced, and as the company paired off and began to leave for the great dining room, Astro succeeded in eluding his worshippers and captured Valeska for a few hasty words.

"There's something in the air," he said under his breath. "Can't you feel it? I don't know just what it is; but there is something sinister impending. Don't laugh. This is not mere professional jargon. You know I'm sensitive to this sort of thing. I never felt it more strongly."

"I have felt so too; but I thought it was a mere fancy."

"Cultivate those fancies, my dear; they're the inchoate beginnings of intuitions. Nothing comes sporadically. There's a reason for every whim we have, and you must learn to trace it."

"I don't like that green-eyed woman. I wonder if she is really a Countess?"

He smiled in amiable derision. "Are you?" Valeska's eyes dilated. "Who is she?"

"That I don't know. I've tried her with all sorts of traps; but she is too clever."

"Oh, she's bad, I know that; but she fascinates me."

told me. She got acquainted through mutual friends in Florence. That's all I know, except—"

"She came alone, in a hired cab, Mrs. Selwyn

He had lowered his voice to a whisper, and was leaning toward Valeska to continue; when the woman in question appeared at the door of the dining room, cast a sharp look up the hall, and espied them.

"Aren't you coming in, monsieur?" She smiled bewitchingly.

"In a moment, Countess."

"I want to know if you're magician enough to tell me what Mrs. Selwyn's punch is made of. It's the most mysterious thing I ever saw."

"If it's as mysterious as you are, my dear Countess, I'll have to admit I can't fathom it."

She dropped a curtsy, tipping her head roguishly to one side, and withdrew.

"Looking for some one," Valeska suggested laconically.

Astro nodded. "Oh—did you see that chap with a pompadour and a curled blond mustache?"

"Yes. One eye was bigger than the other—the right eye."

"Watchmaker. Comes from screwing up his