

calmly, his hands in his overcoat pockets, studying the windows.

"And what next?" asked Valeska.

"We'll wait awhile. Come into this next doorway."

On the side of the doorway they now entered was a sign, "Furnished Rooms." It was now after seven o'clock, and had begun to snow. Valeska stood inside the vestibule protected from the weather; Astro waited just outside watching the doorway of No. 109. The 23rd Street cars clanged noisily by, the din of the traffic muffled by the carpet of snow. The open mouth of the subway sucked in an unsteady stream of wayfarers.

Suddenly Valeska put her hand on Astro's arm. "Does it begin with 'C-o'?" she asked.

He smiled. "No, 'C-a,'" he answered.

"Oh, dear, I thought I had it! But don't tell me! I'm sure I'll work it out, though. But it makes me anxious. Anything might happen on a night like this!"

"Yes; even an assassination."

"You don't fear that, really?" She looked at him in alarm.

"But I do—assassination of a sort. What else could the letter mean?"

She had not time to answer before the door of the next house opened, and a man buttoned up in a fur trimmed overcoat came out. He stopped a moment to raise an umbrella, and they could see that he was a stout, pasty faced German of some fifty years, with a curling yellow mustache. He wore spectacles and seemed to be near sighted.

"There's the man that wrote the letter! Follow him, Valeska! Find out who he is and all that's possible! We must follow every lead."

Valeska was off on the instant, running down the steps and walking swiftly up 23rd Street.

Astro lit a cigar, turned up his collar and waited another half-hour in the doorway. Nobody having entered or left No. 109 by that time, he rang the bell of No. 111. A Swedish maid came to the door.

"I'd like to see what rooms you have," said Astro.

"The only one is on the third floor rear," she replied, and showed him up two flights of unlighted stairs, steep and narrow, to a small square room, meagerly furnished. Walking to the window, Astro saw that level with the floor was a tin covered roof over an extension in the rear. It stretched along the whole width of the four houses in the row. On this he might easily stand and look into the adjoining windows. Saying that he would move in later, Astro paid the girl for a week's rent in advance, and left the house and walked home.

Valeska next morning came full of news. "The German kept right along 23rd Street toward Broadway," she said, "and it occurred to me that I might get him to make the first advances, and get acquainted without being suspected. So I passed him, and very gracefully slipped on the snow and dropped my purse. Then I began looking about on the sidewalk for the money that might have dropped out. My German friend came along and offered to help me. It took sometime, and the long and short of it was that we had quite a conversation, and I convinced him that I was respectable. He walked along with me and asked me where I was going. I said that I had intended going to the Hippodrome with a friend; but that I had been detained, and it was so late I thought I'd go home. He proposed having something to eat, and of course I refused. I had to be urged and urged; but the more I refused, the more anxious he was to have me come. Finally, I reluctantly assented to his invitation, and we went to the Cafe Riche.

"Well, you ought to have seen that German eat—I mean you ought to have heard him eat! I couldn't eat anything myself; but sipped the wine he ordered and coyly led him on, chattering away about myself ingeniously. I had an engagement with Richard Mansfield and a three years' contract at one hundred dollars a week when he died, and was awfully anxious to get another chance. All the money I had was tied up in one of the defunct trust companies, and so on. He kept on eating, taking the biggest mouthfuls I ever heard of and leaving half of it on his mustache. Oh, I put in some hard work, I assure you!

"Then he began asking me questions, and wanted to know if I would like to earn some money on the side. Did I? I jumped at it!—five thousand actor folk out of a job this season, you know, and all that. He said I reminded him of his dead daughter—you know I'm always reminding people of somebody—and he thought he could trust me. I cast down my eyes and let him go on.

"He said there was a man he knew who had stolen some confidential papers, and he wanted to get them away from him without publicity. He

needed a good, clever woman to help him out on the job. I brightened up considerably. He asked me to go home with him so that he could give me a photograph to identify my victim. I said I would; although I confess I was getting nervous, not being quite sure what he was up to. He had begun paying me compliments, and when a German begins to get sentimental—well, you know!

"I took the subway with him, and we went up to 126th Street. There was a big apartment hotel there, called the Dahlia—one of those marble halled affairs that look as if they were built of a dozen different kinds of fancy soap, with a red carpet and awfully funny oil paintings and negro hall boys sitting in Renaissance arm chairs. I refused to go up stairs. Well, after a while he came down the elevator and handed me this photograph. What do you think?"

She handed Astro a cabinet photograph. He lifted his fine brows when he looked at it.

"Lieutenant Cameron!"

Valeska nodded. "I'm to scrape up an acquaintance with him, get his confidence, and then report to Herr Beimer for final instructions. I wonder what poor little Miss Mannering would say?"

She took off her sables, her saucy fur toque, and touched up her hair at the great Louis XIV. mirror at one end of the studio.



"Wake up, Man!" cried Astro. "Here! Smell This!"

Astro sat regarding the portrait in his hand. He looked up to say, "Did you find out what his business was?"

She whirled round to him. "Oh, I forgot! He's the agent for a big German firm, connected with the Krupps' steel plant. They control the rights to a new magazine pistol. I was awfully interested in machinery, you know. It bored me to death; but I listened half an hour to his description of a new ammunition hoist for battleships."

Astro was suddenly impregnated with energy. "Ah!" he intoned. "You didn't remember that the Krupps stand in with the German Government and have the biggest subsidies and contracts in the world? He wants you to make up to a construction officer in the United States navy, does he? He needs a clever woman! I should say he did! Was Herr Beimer sober?"

"Perfectly, so far as I could see, except for his sentimentality. Of course he was a bit effusive, you know."

"Yes, I see. It wasn't his night. It was Haskell's night, whoever Haskell is! But I think we'll have to hurry. This looks more serious than I thought at first. I shall sleep at No. 111 East 23rd Street to-night. And meanwhile, I have a nice job of forgery for you, Valeska. I wish you'd practise copying this writing till you can write a short note that will pass for Lieutenant Cameron's handwriting."

He took a letter from a drawer. The envelope was addressed to Miss Violet Mannering. Valeska took it and read it over carefully. It was a single sheet, torn from a double page, and read as follows:

"I believe that just as everything seems somehow different at night—when we can see farther than by day: for can we not see the stars?—when our emotions seem freer—so there are two worlds in which it is possible to exist. One is the dreary every day place of business and duty and pain; the other is free from care or suffering. Don't we enter that occult world at night through our dreams, where there is no such thing as conscience? There are no consequences there. No doubt it's a dangerous place, because it is abnormal; but its exploration is fascinating. Why ignore the fact that it exists as a refuge from the worries of matter of fact existence—"

Valeska read it thoughtfully. Her eyes looked through the paper as if into a mist beyond. "No wonder poor Miss Mannering is worried!" she said to herself. She looked at Astro, as if to ask a question. He was busy with a planimeter, calculating the area of a queer, irregular polygon drawn on a sheet of parchment. Seeing his tense look, she turned to her study of the manuscript.

As soon as it was dark, Astro opened the window of his room on 23rd Street and walked along the crackling tin roof till he came to the first window of the house occupied by the Assassins. Looking in, he saw a small, bare hall bedroom, furnished with a cot, a washstand, and one chair. The next two windows were lighted. He approached them carefully. Three men were seated at a library table strewn with magazines. All were smoking comfortably. One, Astro recognised as the Lieutenant, another as Herr Beimer. The third was a yellow faced man with red hair, high cheekbones, and dark eyes deeply set into his skull. In front of him was a plate filled with what looked like caviar sandwiches, cut small and thin.

Herr Beimer said something, at which the others laughed loudly. Then with a flourish, as if drinking their healths, Lieutenant Cameron took one of the sandwiches and ate it almost with an air of bravado. Beimer looked at his watch. The lean, yellow faced man walked out of the room. The Lieutenant took up an illustrated paper and began to read.

Astro tiptoed carefully back to his room, put on his overcoat, and went down stairs, walked over to the drug store, and rang up Valeska at the telephone booth.

"Have you written the letter?" he asked.

"Not yet," was the answer.

"Well, you must do it immediately as well as you can. Bring it to No. 111 and ask for Mr. Silverman."

He then went back to his room. Another stealthy glance through the windows of the club showed the two still at the table. Cameron was busy with a pencil and a sheet of paper, explaining something to the German. The yellow faced man watched them over his book. The Lieutenant was evidently talking with a little difficulty; every little while he stopped, and began again with an effort. One leg was twitching at the knee joint. He supported his head heavily on his hand.

Going back to his room, Astro took a bottle of ammonia from his overcoat pocket and placed it on the sink. Next he poured a white powder from a paper and dissolved it in a tumbler of water, stirring it with a spoon. This done, he took the washbowl from the stand and put it on the table beside the bed. Then he sat down to wait for Valeska.

In half an hour she appeared, breathing hard, her cheeks flushed with her haste.

"Here it is," she said, as soon as the maid had left. "It's the best I could do." She handed it over. It read:

"Please allow the bearer to come in and see me on important business at any time he may present this.

ROBERT CAMERON."

"Good!" said Astro. "Now you must wait here and listen at the window till you hear my whistle. Then come right along the roof to me and be ready for anything."

He started to open the door, when she put a hand on his arm. "Does it begin with 'C-a-n'?" she asked breathlessly.

He nodded. "How did you get it?"

"From the Lieutenant's letter."

"Of course. Well, it may have begun with 'D-a-n' by this time."

"D-a-n-g-e-r?"

"Perhaps. Be ready!" And he was down stairs.

At the door of the Assassins' Club, a white-haired negro answered the bell.

Astro presented the letter. "I wish to see Lieutenant Cameron immediately!" he said.

"Ah don't perzactly know, sah," said the darkey. "Mah o'ders is not to leave nobody come in yah. Ah expect Ah'd better say no, sah."

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