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Mrs. Selwyn's Emerald

Continued from page 15)

She stared at him indignantly, muttering to herself; but tugged at her glove, nevertheless. He took her bared hand and inspected the palm. Then he took her right hand, gloved as it was, and inspected that.

He left her as suddenly as he had come, however, with no comment whatever, and darted to the young debutante who had also been of his group in the dining room.

"Quick, Miss Preston!" he said. "Take off your left hand glove!"

Miss Preston was young enough and thoughtless enough to take the situation lightly, and obeyed him with a smile. He gave her palm a glance, then turned her hand and looked at the back. Then he left her for the pale, wan youth. His glove too came off his left hand, and his right gloved hand was examined. The man with the pompadour came next, and the same pantomime was enacted. Astro's eyes stayed for a second or two on the man's left coat sleeve; then he passed on.

So he went from one to another, now to a woman, now to a man, until he came to the Countess Trixola. Her eyes had never left him; her hand remained on her breast, as if to hide the beating of her heart. Her eyes were hard and cold; but the pupils were dilated. Her upper lip quivered a little.

"Will you kindly remove your glove, Countess? No, your right, if you please. Yes, thank you. Now your left hand, just as it is. Thank you."

He turned swiftly to the next beside her; but before he had examined the hand he had bitten the knuckle of his forefinger, as if in abstraction.

This Valeska noticed, and from that moment regardless of what he was doing, she kept her eyes on the Countess. The woman had turned to a companion, and was evidently voicing some sarcastic comment on Astro's methods. As she spoke, she moved insensibly away, and backed toward another group, nearer the wall by the windows. The company had now begun to move a little, and her progress was so clever as to be unnoticeable to one who did not specially follow her movements. She passed a few feet nearer the window.

Astro went on steadily, from one person to another, examining palms. In another moment, however, he had stopped dramatically, put both his hands to his forehead, staggered, and dropped to the floor. A woman screamed. Two or three men ran up to support him in their arms. A physician elbowed his way through the crowd.

At that moment, while everyone was staring at the group that surrounded the Master of Mysteries, Valeska saw the Countess move quickly toward the window. There, for a moment, she stood facing the assembly, looking sharply about, her hands behind her back. An instant more, and she had left again and joined the man with the pompadour. She drew him aside and spoke to him. He nodded, looked behind him, and moved away.

Some one was calling for water. A man laid his hand to the door to open it, when Selwyn's voice barked out again. He assumed command again.

"No one leaves this room! This man is not seriously hurt; he hasn't even fainted. It's all a trick to cover his failure. We'll end this nonsense right now, and have in the police!"

Valeska hurried up to the group, pressed in between the bystanders, and knelt beside Astro. "Stand back, please!" she exclaimed. "I know how to attend to him. He has gone into a psychic trance, that's all. The

strain was too much for him. He'll be all right in a moment, and will go on with his search."

She took his hand, and, unseen by the company, pressed it four times. Astro's eyes opened. He sat up; rose to his feet slowly; trembled; looked about; took a step forward tentatively. Valeska still held his hand.

"Silence, everybody!" she called out, and held up her right hand with a warning gesture.

Every eye turned to the two, and every tongue was silent, as Astro moved, at first uncertainly, and then with increasing confidence, directly across the room. He stopped before a tall cloisonne vase standing in front of the window, looked at it for a moment stupidly, then lifted it and turned it upside down. Out dropped the Selwyn brooch.

A hurricane of applause burst from the company, hands clapped, and men cried "Bravo!" Mrs. Selwyn rushed forward.

Astro handed her the brooch. She gave one look at it, clasped it to her breast, and then took the palmist's hand with both hers.

"Wonderful!" she exclaimed. "It's perfectly marvelous!"

Then her eyes caught a whimsical look in his, saw his cryptic smile, and her face changed. First it grew suddenly blank, then a delighted expression flooded it.

"Why—why, it was a trick! wasn't it? How clever! Oh, it was worth the fright, really! It was the best thing I've ever seen done! I never suspected it for a minute! Oh, thank you so much! I knew you wouldn't be mean enough to refuse altogether. I knew you'd be nice and amuse us somehow. But my! You are a wizard! aren't you?"

Selwyn strode forward. "Do you mean to say you cooked this whole thing up, sir? Well, you certainly fooled me, by Jove! Ha, ha! You got us all going, didn't you? Think of that! But you pretty nearly caused a big scandal, I tell you!" He turned to a neighbour and began to talk vociferously about it.

The crowd swarmed about Astro now, each eager to congratulate and to praise. Everyone gesticulated, almost screamed at one another, laughing, asking questions without number. Dozens of people, their conventional reserve broken down by the strain of the last few minutes, shook Astro by the hand.

The Countess came up also, to flatter him on his success.

"But you didn't tell me my character after all," she complained playfully.

The glance Astro gave her was cold and sharp. "Madam," he replied, "your character will hardly stand another such test. If you will call at my studio to-morrow, I shall give you some advice. When do you expect to return to Italy?"

She gave him a long stare, grew a little pale, but shrugged her shoulders. "Are you in a hurry for me to return, monsieur?"

"I predict a great misfortune for you, if you remain here for more than a week."

"Thank you very much for your advice, then. You are too kind. Yes, I think I shall be bored to death in this town. I shall go. Au revoir, monsieur! I should like to know you better. We would make fine play-mates!"

She smiled, and, as if reluctantly, removed her eyes, and left him.

Mrs. Selwyn drew him aside with eager eyes. "Of course I know I'm a pig," she said; "but really, Astro, couldn't you get that diamond off the Countess' hand and hide it somewhere? It would be such fun, you know! Do be nice and do just one

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64

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